

薬屋のひとりごと

Kusuriya no Hitorigoto 2

2

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KUSURIYA NO HITORIGOTO

– The Pharmacist's Monologue –

- Volume 2 -

IMPERIAL COURT 1

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CHAPTER 1

DAD

“Is that true?”

Jinshi said, using polite speech¹ but aside from that not that putting enough respect in his manners. The sovereign in his prime, sporting a beautiful beard, nodded slowly.

They were at a certain palace in the Imperial Court. Though it was a small structure, it provided an open view of its surroundings – so open that even a single mouse cannot sneak in.

The sovereign poured himself a glass of grape wine and slowly reclined in his couch that was decorated with ivory. Jinshi, who sat in the same seat as this country’s most revered person, was remarkably relaxed. Up until now.

The emperor stroked his beautiful beard as he grinned widely. Cunning. Associating him with that word would be impolite, but it fit him so well. He is a person who will never lose.

“So what will you do? Aren’t you the gardener who maintains my² flower garden?”

The choice of words surely to provoke him, Jinshi wanted to smile bitterly. And yet, his smile was the celestial maiden’s smile that is said to enchant anyone. Though it was strange even if he said it himself, Jinshi only had confidence in his own looks. It was cynical; he is unable to get his hands on the things he truly wanted. That’s right, no matter how much effort he made to move away from superiority, he was unable to move away from excellence³. Even though he was only a little better than the average person. Only his outward appearance was superior to everyone else.

It was something he now understood, though he couldn’t stomach it in the past. If he wasn’t a prodigy in intellect or military arts, then he would make use of other excellence he had. As a result, Jinshi exists as the beautiful Inner Palace administrator. Why not just make use of that fine face, sweet voice, things that are excessive for a man, to his heart’s content?

“As you desire.” Jinshi, his smile graceful yet determined, bowed to the emperor.

If there are things you can do, then try do it, the emperor smiled with a mouth full of grape wine.

I get it, Jinshi was, after all, no more than a child. Thus, he could only flounder on the palm of emperor's large hands.

You can do whatever you want.

Jinshi must grant the unreasonable emperor's request. This was Jinshi's job, and at the time same, a bet with the emperor.

He must win the bet. That was the sole method that Jinshi chose himself. There might be other methods, but that did not occur to Jishin, the mediocre person.

Therefore, he chose today's path.

Jinshi raised the cup to his lips and moistened his throat with sweet fruit cider. On his face was the beautiful smile of a celestial maiden.



"Okay sure, this one, this one too. Ah, and bring this one too."

It was Meimei, the prostitute, who was throwing rouge, face powder and clothes at her. Maomao had come here as a little girl⁴ in Meimei's room in the Rokushoukan.

"I don't need this much, Neechan⁵."

Maomao picked up the rouge and face powder that was thrown, and returned them to the shelf in the room.

Meimei criticised her actions with a shocked face.

"It's not 'I don't need this much'. There are those people who use better things over there. Shape up a little bit, why don't you."

"It's such a prostitute thing to dress nicely when you go to work."

I want to compound the herbs I picked up yesterday, Maoamao said with a side glance, just as a wooden slip came hurtling her way. It was something Meimei, who was good

at taking care of people but had a slightly short fuse, had thrown. Maomao clutched her head and crouched down.

“Did you think that just because you got a good job you can become that kind of people? There are people who can’t help but envy your position in this world. You have to live in gratefulness, otherwise your honoured guest will escape you.”

“...I understand.”

The Rokushoukan’s teaching was slightly rough for both the madam and Meimei. However, Meimei’s words were persuasive. Maomao awkwardly went to pick up the wooden slip. It was blackened with whittled marks from being wrote on countless times. There was poetry written in graceful characters on it. Meimei, as a prostitute, is already at the age to think about retirement, but she had the intelligence to know that her popularity had yet to decline even now. She entertained her guest by writing poetry and playing Go⁶ and Shogi⁷. A prostitute who sells her art instead of sensuality.

Meimei was one of the Three Princesses of the Rokushoukan. Maomao didn’t know how much effort was needed to rise to become a top-class prostitute of a well-established brothel. But, Meimei’s current position was thanks to her Neesan⁸ who taught her the knowledge to do so. The Neesan, as it was called in the brothels, wasn’t a blood-related older sister, but rather a prostitute she herself worked for when she was a *kamuro*.

Currently, the three prostitutes called the Three Princesses were all working as Neesans.

“You’re already working in such a nice place. Earn properly.”

Standing there was the gentle, helpful neechan, not the violent one who threw the wooden slip until then. She slowly stroked Maomao’s cheeks with fingers painted with nail polish, and swept her messy side hair behind her ears.

“...Okay.”

Meimei smiled gracefully at Maomao’s meek answer.

“But then, you’ll even find a good husband. The place may be what it is, there should be a lot of hopeful stock. Ah, I’ll be happy if you bring in honoured guests for me while you’re at it.”

Her smile was little different to the gentle one she had just then. There was a bit of black-belliness mixed into it.

Meimei-nee-chan cackled evilly. *She's like the madam in some respects*, Maomao thought. Those who become prostitutes were people who wouldn't survive if they lacked determination.

And so, Maomao ended up bringing home a large wrapping cloth crammed with clothes and a complete set of makeup. On the way back, Maomao, who received all kinds of gifts from other prostitutes and one-sidedly made to promise to bring in new guests for them, staggered with her heavy baggage back to her dilapidated home.



The beautiful nobleman who appeared in the prostitution quarter after half a month of her leaving the Inner Palace was fresh in her memories.

The eunuch with strange tastes swallowed what Maomao had jokingly said. To shoulder her debt, he spread out plenty of money with change before the madam's eyes, and the caterpillar fungus⁹ seemed to be a thoughtful gift. Even though they were just affixing a seal on the contract, it didn't even take a quarter-dual-hour(30min).

And so, Maomao will be working again in that noble place. She felt a little awkward over the fact that she was going to live-in and work again while leaving her dad, but when she saw the contract – the rules have become considerably lenient compared to before. Well, since she won't be missing with no one having any idea where she was like before, her dad smiled gently and said, "Do as you want." But, what was that brief frown and look he gave Maomao when he looked at the contract supposed to mean? Well, it might be because she was going to work in a place her dad, the former eunuch, had not very good memories of. She decided not to think too deeply on that. As it is common in the world for it to be eventually meaningless even if she thought deeply, just thinking was pointless.

"You received quite a bit." Her dad, who spoke in a calm tone, said as he boiled medicinal herbs in the cauldron.

The dilapidated house with the draught coming in was still cold even with the kitchen range lit. Maomao and her dad wore many layers of clothes. She saw that her dad kept rubbing his knee and wondered if the place where he undertook physical punishment a long time ago was hurting.

“I can’t take that many things.”

Maomao looked at the baggage she already prepared. Grinder¹⁰ and mortar¹¹, a notebook that recorded the types of medicinal herbs, and the barest minimum of clothes and underwear she needed.

(I’ll absolutely need the grinder and mortar. The notebook is also a need. But decreasing the amount of underwear anymore is...)

Maomao groaned, wrinkling her brows.

Her dad set the pot down onto the range and approached Maomao.

“Maomao ah, you probably shouldn’t bring this.”

Maomao, who had her compounding tools taken out from the wrapping cloth, looked at her dad dubiously.

“If you bring this sort of thing even though you’re not a medical official, it is possible that people will even suspect you of poisoning. ...Come on, don’t make such a face. You decided this. It’s no good to call it off at this point.”

“You’re joking....” Maomao slumped down onto the dirt floor.

It seemed that her dad can recognise what she wanted to say at a glance from her expression.

“Okay alright, hasten your preparations and go to sleep. If you get a little permission you can bring more things with you. It’s impolite to be absent-minded on your first day of work.”

“...I get it.”

Maomao reluctantly placed the compounding tools into the creaky shelf, and put in several things she could use from the gifts she got into the wrapping cloth. Her eyes narrowed when she saw the shell with rouge inside and the face powder, but for now she only put the compact rouge into the cloth bag.

She also put in the high class padded garment that was among the things she received.

Was she given a guest's lost item? Its design wasn't something a prostitute would wear.

Maomao looked at her dad who had put away the pot and was adding firewood into the range. After her dad was done with adding firewood, with a walk that was painful to look at, he went to lie down on the futon, which was a straw mat with only a thin cloth. Draped on top as a cover was yet another straw mat and piles of clothes that he wasn't wearing.

"Come on, I'll put out the lights when you're done." Her dad said, holding on the lantern that smelt of fish oil.

After Maomao was done with bundling her wrapping cloth, she was going to settle into the bed that was on the opposite side of the room. But suddenly she had a thought, and she was then trailing the straw mat over.

"What is this? It's been a surprisingly long time since you did this. I thought you weren't a child anymore?"

"Well, it's cold." Maomao's glance shifted slightly, awkward.

She dragged the futon she brought along next to her dad's bed. If she remembered correctly, she slept alone when she passed ten years old. Just how many years ago has it been?

Maomao draped the high class garment she received between her dad's and her own futon, and slowly closed her eyes. She laid down, curling her back like an embryo.

"I'll be alone again."

At her dad, who said it in his calm tone,

"Not really. This time I can come back any time I want." Maomao coldly replied.

But, her back touching her dad's arms was slightly warm.

"That's true. Come back any time."

He stroked Maomao's head with his wrinkled hand. Though she called him "dad, dad", his appearance was closer to an old woman. Thus, if you say it around his character,

he was like a mother.

Maomao didn't have a mother. But instead, she had a gentle dad, an annoying hag, for what she is, and lots of lively older sisters.

(I can come back whenever I want.)

Even if she thought it that way, it really was lonely. As Maomao felt the warmth of the hand that was like a withered tree branch continue to stroke her hair, she fell asleep.

1. Pretend there's a polite form of English lol
2. As with all Chinese emperors, this guy refers to himself with the original (historically speaking) first person pronoun: 朕 "chin/zhen4".
3. “優にはなれど秀にはなれぬ” I tried. It was a play on the word 優秀 “yuushuu”, which means excellence/superiority. And *taking the excel from the lence* sounds awkward as heck.
4. I'm guessing 'as a kamuro', 'cause that was what they were written as once, but I can't be too sure.
5. 小姐, literally means Miss, but Maomao means older sister.
6. 囲碁 “igo”, A strategy board game invented in Ancient China. You play with black and white stones, and the aim is to take over your opponent's territory by surrounding them with your colour pieces.
7. 将棋 “shougi”, Japanese board game. Also known as the General's Game, it's something close to Chess. You capture your opponent's pieces.
8. 大姐, literally means eldest sister.
9. 冬蟲夏草 “touchuukasou/dong1 chong2 xia4 cao3”, *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*. An expensive fungus that grows from moth larvae. Very expensive. Used to treat pretty much everything in TCM.
10. すり鉢 “suribachi” is something like the mortar and pestle.
11. 薬研 “yagen” is the one with the back-and-forth crushing wheel.

CHAPTER 2

IMPERIAL COURT LADY

“I was so sure I would be going back to the Inner Palace again.”

The clothes Maomao wore were simple, but instead of linen they were made from cotton. She understood that the treatment was even better than she expected from the time she wore linen when she was an Inner Palace maidservant.

“No, it’s not that easy to return when you have already been dismissed once.”

It was Gaoshun – gallant like a military officer yet more devoted than any other – who was guiding her around the Imperial Court. He was clad in his usual simple official attire, and was teaching Maomao the names of the buildings and their duty stations. Considering the vastness of the Imperial Court, fingers and toes won’t be enough to count all these buildings. Maomao honestly couldn’t be bothered to remember things that were outside her interests, so she was examining the garden plants as she pretended to listen and nod.

(The Inner Palace really has more things you can use as ingredients than what you have here.)

In the past, Ruomen, her dad, had transplanted usable plants when he was living in the Inner Palace. In spite of it being an enclosed space, he grew countless numbers of medicinal herbs.

While Gaoshun was in the middle of explaining the buildings one by one, Maomao noticed a prickling feeling from the back of her neck. Court ladies, obliquely from behind, only their gazes moving, were staring at Maomao’s group. No, they were certainly only looking at Maomao. Those looks were inexplicably repulsive. It was like an intuition shared between fellow men, something that only fellow women would understand. Like how men will use physical attack on their rivals, it is common for women to use psychological attack.

(Feels bad.)

Maomao, sticking out her tongue for a fleeting moment, followed after Gaoshun who was walking towards the next duty station.



Maomao's job was no different to an Inner Palace maidservant. It was to the extent of her cleaning her assigned areas and sometimes doing odd jobs when asked of her. Originally, she was supposed to an Imperial Court lady whose work was more like a civil official, but Maomao didn't have the qualification. She failed that exam.

Jinshi and Gaoshun were both surprised. They thought Maomao would pass easily. Certainly, the contents of the exam required effort as it is. Even so, Maomao could write and had basic minimum of training for poetry and erhu due to her being raised in the red-light district. The exam wasn't as hard as the Civil Examination. Jinshi had confidence that Maomao who had good memory wouldn't fail.

(I'm sorry. For failing.)

Maomao wiped the window frames until they were squeaky clean. It was Maomao's principle to work diligently.

Although, studying was another thing. Honestly, she was below average in memorising things she was not interested in. The knowledge of pharmacy was still relevant, but what can you do with learning history? Even if she memorised things like law, it was something that will someday change, so it wasn't worth her time to memorise. So, no matter how much ability she had, things she won't ever use were pointless to know. It was regrettable, but Maomao just couldn't put in any effort for those studies. It was obvious that she would fail.

(It's unexpectedly dirty.)

Well, there would be places you can't reach if it's that wide, Maomao thought. Though, she didn't discard the thought that it could be a skimped job instead. The court ladies of the Imperial Court come to this place with qualifications. It was a big difference to the mish-mash of court ladies of the Inner Palace. They had pedigree and education; they have self-respect from that alone. They probably think that things like playing maidservant just cannot be. They won't sweep up even if dust piles up, for instance.

(Well, it's not their job.)

The court ladies were like secretaries. Certainly, this doesn't include sweeping. It wasn't required of them. Even though it was like this, it's not like it was fine if they didn't do it at all. As government-owned slaves were abolished since the time of the previous emperor, the odd jobs were done by their own people.

And so, many high officials employ maidservants to clean for them. Maomao was currently under Jinshi's direct supervision for that same reason.

(Well then, what shall I do next?)

Maomao's cleaning area was Jinshi's office. It was a wide room, but minimalistic, devoid of extravagance. The owner of the place seemed to have a busy position; he rarely returns to his office. This made it easy for Maomao to clean, but if there were issues.

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

When she realised it, she was involved with court ladies she wasn't acquainted with. The court ladies were all bigger than Maomao; there was even one among them who was a head taller.

(Good food and good upbringing huh.)

Maomao inadvertently ended up staring at the court lady's chest due to her height. From her physique, she might be mixed with foreign blood. From the fact that her fair skin was beautiful, it was something she wanted to see once in her life.

"Hey, listen!"

(Ohh, not good not good.)

While she saw thinking about slightly rude things, she angered the court ladies. In summary, these court ladies were angry wondering why Maomao was working under Jinshi's direct supervision. No matter what they say, she was an employee so she can't anything. Even if she honestly told them, they wouldn't agree to it.

Supposing that Maomao had a barbarian princess exoticness like Consort Gyokuyou and a voluptuous body like Consort Rifa and sexiness like Pairin-nee-chan, no one would have any complaints – there shouldn't be a reason to have any complaints. However, Maomao was like an overly skinny seedy chicken that was covered in

freckles. It couldn't be helped that she was an eyesore to be working beside the beautiful eunuch; they thought if there was a chance they could do it in place of her.

(Umm, what should I do?)

Maomao wasn't that articulate of a person; there were many times she wasn't able to express herself well. But staying silent will only get to their anger.

"So, are you guys saying that you're jealous of me?"

Straight to the point. Those words were enough to anger them. *I knew it was the wrong thing to say.* A slap across her cheeks left a mark. *That hurt.* She rubbed her cheeks. *I want to avoid getting lynched by the five court ladies around me,* Maomao considered. Even if it was female strength, pain was pain.

There's nothing I could so, so let's just give one excuse, Maomao thought.

"Don't tell me you think I'm getting special treatment? That sort of thing is impossible. There's no way an ugly woman like me would be a companion to that sort of gentlemen who looks like a celestial maiden, right?"

The fully angered court ladies' faces twitched at the words Maomao spun with her head lowered.

This might work. Maomao continued.

"Is the nobleman you supposed such a gross eater? Did you think that he would be the type to want to purposely want to eat chicken bones with its meat shaved off and dropped to the floor, even though there is abalone and pork before him? Well, if that's the case, wouldn't that make him a special ^{maniac} tastes?"

Maybe it was because she purposely emphasised the maniac part. The court ladies' bodies were even trembling with a start.

"I don't know myself, but is that person with that degree of a heavenly smile and beauty that sort of maniac?"

"There's no way!"

"Th-that's right."

The court ladies started to raise a fuss. But, one person among them still faced her with doubt.

“In that case, why did he employ you?” A relatively composed court lady said.

It was the court lady with that splendid chest, uh, splendid physique. Come to think of it, she noticed that only this court lady had calmed down some time before. It seemed like she was following the other court ladies who stepped back half-a-step; she looked like she was questioning her circumstances.

(Well, if I can't deceive them.)

Maomao raised her left hand and pulled up her sleeves. She stripped off the bleached cotton that bandaged her wrists to her elbows. Since it honestly wasn't something to be shown to other people, she only showed it to them an instant, but the court ladies' stiffened expression indicated that they saw enough.

(It's soggy because I was experimenting with burn medicines recently.)

It must be an extremely disgusting thing for the young ladies with good upbringing to see.

“The beautiful gentleman who is like a celestial maiden is a celestial maiden down to his heart. He provided someone like me a job to pay for my own keep.”

Maomao said as she rebandaged her arm.

“...Let's go.”

The court ladies, having lost interest, left. There was only one person who glanced at Maomao, but she returned to her post soon after.

(It's finally over.)

Maomao, neck joints creaking, took up the dust cloth again. As she was going to move to the next place and resume cleaning, she discovered a beautiful eunuch was standing with his head pressed against the wall.

“What are you doing? Jinshi-sama.”

“...nothing. That aside, are you always involved? Like that.”

“It’s fine. There is less trouble than Inner Palace court ladies. By the way, what’s with that pose?”

She thought it’s a pose that a beautiful nobleman really shouldn’t do. Indeed, Gaoshun, who is available at the back, was clutching his head.

“Well then, I’ll be heading off to my next cleaning area.”

As Maomao was leaving with a pail in hand, Jinshi muttered to himself in his beautiful voice, “Maniac....”

(I don’t think I really said something bad.)

Even if Jinshi saw the entire exchange from just then, it wasn’t that she did anything wrong. Maomao worked hard on her cleaning work.

CHAPTER 3

PIPE

(I always thought he was a leisurely person.)

It seems that Jinshi – that much of a nobleman? – wasn't leisurely. *He's more on the busy side actually*, Maomao thought. His work wasn't just on the Inner Palace as she initially believed, he did other things too.

Maomao was tasked with odd-jobs in Jinshi's office throughout the morning, and then odd jobs in Jinshi's private room in the afternoon while he is in the Imperial Court. Though it was called his private room, the size of it can be considered a building – she could clearly see the garden, where the extravagance was focused, from the display window. There was one more maidservant beside Maomao, a woman past her fifties. She initially tilted her head at the lack of young women and young men, but when she thought deeply about it, it was impossible to employ those who were there only for the money. Rather, were he to employ young people, they might space out instead of work with the employer being such a looker.

Jinshi was focused on the documents with a moody expression. Maomao was in the corner of the room gathering up scrapped papers. The fine quality papers have become rubbish, worthless to look at with absurd plans written on them. No matter what kind of absurd bills there are, the scrapped papers cannot be recycled. They must be burnt.

(You can earn some pocket money if you sell them though.)

It was her work despite her bad thoughts, so she went to burn it as instructed. It was where the military training grounds and treasury was, which was at the corner of the vast Imperial Court, coming out of Jinshi's office. The papers will be burned in the rubbish incinerator that was there.

(The military huh.)

She honestly didn't want to go there, but she had to. When she pushed herself to do it, understanding it was her job, something was draped over her shoulders.

“Please wear this since it’s cold outside. It’s for maidservant use.”

It was the diligent and attentive Gaoshun who draped a padded garment on Maomao. There was light snow falling outside, and the cold wintry wind could be heard. She had forgotten as she was in the warm room with lots of braziers, but not even a month has passed in the year. It was the coldest season of the year.

“Thank you very much.”

She was truly grateful. She was undeserving of what the eunuch did for her. Even though it was for maidservant use, even if it was made of crude materials, there was a substantial difference between wearing and not wearing it. As she passed her arms through the sleeves of the unbleached cotton, Jinshi was staring at her. No, not staring, glaring.

(I wonder what’s eating at him?)

Maomao tilted her head, but it seems that he was glaring at Gaoshun instead of Maomao. Gaoshun’s shoulders twitched, as if he noticed the gaze.

“...This is from Jinshi-sama. I was only passing it over to you.”

For some reason, Gaoshun was making gestures as he said it. For some reason, it sounded like he was making excuses.

(Is this what you mean by don’t take liberties?)

Gaoshun has it hard too.

“Is that so?”

Maomao said her thanks to Jinshi just in case and headed to the incinerator with the basket of wastepaper.



(Dad, you should have planted them here too.)

Maomao sighed.

The Inner Palace had lots of medicinal herbs transplanted by Ruomen, her dad. He is a carefree, worldly-wise person, but he considerably changed the vegetation of the Inner Palace as he pleased.

The Imperial Court was several times vaster than the Inner Palace, but it didn't have much medicinal herbs that could be used as ingredients. The only things she could find were dandelion and mugwort – plants that could be found anywhere. She also found red spider lily. She liked eating its bulbs soaked in water. Only just that if she couldn't skilfully remove the poison in the bulbs, she would immediately get a stomach ache.

(I guess that's all there is.)

It was difficult to find them in the winter season, but still her expectation was light. She secretly thought about even planting seeds this time.

As she was walking to the rubbish incinerator, she found a figure she recognised. It was the young military officer with a fearless face. Yes, it was Rihaku. From the colour of his belt, it seems he got promoted. He was talking about something to people who look like his subordinates nearby.

(He's working hard.)

Apparently, he goes to the Rokushoukan every holiday and drinks tea with a *kamuro* companion. Of course, his favourite is Pairin-nee-chan, but calling for her will require a commoner's half year of annual income.

Even so, she was considerably inexpensive for a top-class prostitute, but that reason was raised by a minor point. That prostitute was a premium, her value would decrease if she has a lot of secret eating.

That pitiful man, having tasted heavenly nectar, would go to catch a glimpse of the face of the *flower on a high peak*¹, even from the gap of the curtains. She heard that, even with his promotion, he was working hard to get closer to the flower. A truly diligent honeybee.

As if her eyes of pity reached him, Rihaku came running towards Maomao with his arms swinging. He certainly is a large-breed dog. Instead of a tail, his hair that was fell out from the cloth was a tassel, swinging left and right.

“Oh, are ya a consort’s attendant or what today?”

Rihaku, who didn’t know about Maomao’s dismissal, asked her about that.

“No. I have gone from working at the Inner Palace to be a certain personage’s room attached maid.”

It was a pain to talk about the dismissal, so she told him the abridged version.

“Room attached maid? Who’s the one with that kind of taste?”

“Indeed, he has strange tastes, right.”

Though what Rihaku said for her was extremely rude, well, it was a normal response. Doing as he likes, having a girl that was like a dead tree with a face full of spots live in as a room attached maid. She really didn’t intend to keep the freckle make-up now, but she had no choice but to obey what her master said. For some reason, Jinshi still had Maomao maintain her freckled face.

(Just what does he want to do, that man.)

“That sayin’, I heard a high official redeemed a prostitute from ya place recently.”

“Something like that.”

(It can’t be helped even if he thinks of it that way.)

When the employment contract was settled and she went to the Imperial Court, her enthusiastic older sisters polished up her whole body, made her wear her best clothes, done up her hair and lavishly applied make-up on her. She probably looked nothing like a newcomer maidservant then.

She remembered that her dad was looking at her like he was sending off a calf for some reason.

It was strange for a prostitute to enter the Imperial Court, but since Jinshi stood out even more, she was awfully uncomfortable with the attention. She immediately changed out of her clothes, but a number of people had seen it.

(At any rate.)

Even though the actual person was right in front of him, this man was chatting on without noticing at all. As expected of the mongrel.

“By the way, you look like you’re in the middle of something, but is that alright?”

“Ah, I’m just ’bout done with it.”

His subordinates came closer. The military officers, having low salary and a drought of women, looked happy to see that there was a court lady around, but when they saw Maomao, they made a blatant look of dejection. Seriously, if the boss is like the boss, then the subordinate is like the subordinate.

“I’ve absolutely no idea what the cause is. Well, not like it’s unusual in this season.”

She supposed with his words that there was a small fire last night. That he investigated the cause of that.

Maomao remembered her interest on something or other, and approached the warehouse of the small fire disturbance.

“Oi, don’t get too close.”

“I know.

As she replied Rihaku in that manner, Maomao carefully surveyed the perimeter of the building.

(Hmmm.)

There were several strange points if this was a small fire.

If this really was a small fire, then why was it left to a high official the level of Rihaku? Wouldn’t a government official of an even lower position be sufficient?

Also, unusually for a small fire, there were debris from the building scattered about. Wouldn’t that rather make it an explosion? Were there any injured people?

(It looks like there is a suspicion of terrorism?)

It was a generally peaceful era but that didn't mean that everyone didn't have feelings of discontent. Foreign races occasionally come attacking, and famine and drought certainly exists. Particularly, due to the yearly court lady hunts from the era of the previous emperor, the lack of wives in the rural community have also become a serious issue. Additionally, there was also the abolition of slavery. There were also merchants whose trades have ended because of that. There shouldn't be few people who were bitter about that now. It had only been five years since the previous emperor had left the world of the living. There were many who still has memory of the previous rule.

"Oi, what are ya doing? Didn't I tell ya to keep away."

"Ah, something piqued my interest."

Maomao looked through the broken window. There were burnt goods stacked up inside. From the tubers that had tumbled to the floor, she guessed it was a food warehouse. It was truly wasteful that the tubers had went past the well-cooked stage to cinders.

The other thing that fell is, Maomao picked up a rod-like thing that had fallen to the ground.

(Ivory carving? Is it a pipe?)

"Don't loiter as ya please."

As if she was ignoring Rihaku's words, Maomao crossed her arms. Something connected in her mind.

"Will you hear what I have to say?"

"I can hear ya."

He can hear, but he was not hearing. He thought it was nothing, but that was actually a terrible character.

Maomao moved away from the warehouse and headed towards the opposite side. It appeared that the untouched goods were stacked here.

"Can I have that?"

Maomao pointed to the unused wooden box. It was probably something designed to

hold fruits or something – it was reliably made.

“I don’t see why not? What are ya gonna do with that?”

“I’ll explain later. I’ll take this too.”

Maomao located a board that could be used as a box lid.

“Do you have a hammer and a saw? I’ll need nails too.”

“What are ya doing?”

“A little experiment.”

“Experiment?”

Though Rihaku tilted his head, he cooperated, seeing as though he was more curious. What is this, though he looked dissatisfied with this court lady, the boss looked like he judged that he was outclassed in this thing, and prepared for her. Maomao made a board right in the middle of the opening of the empty box, and nailed that on as a lid.

“You’re surprisingly skilled.”

Rihaku, who came forward to peer at her work, was like a dog who found a ball to play with.

“I have a poor upbringing. I have to make whatever I don’t have.”

She took out something from the goods that were nearby the completely burnt warehouse, and put it into the wooden box.

“Excuse me, is there kindling?”

Maomao said, and one of the subordinates went to get a smouldering straw rope. During that time, Maomao went to draw some water from the well. Rihaku, not understanding what was happening, sat on top of the wooden box, watching them with his chin on his hands.

“Thank you very much.”

Maomao accepted the kindling and lowered her head at Rihaku's subordinate. The subordinate said something or other, and as if he was interested in what she might be doing, went to sit down some distance away, watching Maomao.

Maomao, holding onto the kindling, went to stand before the wooden box with the lid. But Rihaku was next to her for some reason.

"Rihaku-sama. It's dangerous so can you stand further away?"

"What is dangerous? The lass is doing something. As if it's dangerous to me the military officer."

As he was sticking his chest out considerably largely, she sighed as there was nothing she could do about it. This type would only understand through practical experience.

"I understand. It's dangerous so please be extra careful. Please run away at once."

Giving the doubting Rihaku a sidelong glance, Maomao pulled the sleeve of the subordinate who was close by, guiding him to come here. She told him to look from the back of the warehouse.

Even if he comes back, when she threw the kindling into the wooden box from before, he ran away while covering his head.

Flames exploded out from the box, it violently burst into flames.

"Wooooooooahhh!"

Rihaku narrowly avoided the roaring pillar of fire. It was good he avoided it, but the fire had spread to his swinging hair tassel. Maomao splashed the bucket of water she prepared beforehand on Rihaku, who was panicking with his hair caught on fire. The stench of burning hair and smoke remaining, the fire was gone.

"Even though I told you to please run away."

Do you understand what it means when I say this is dangerous? Maomao looked at Rihaku.

"..."

The subordinate hurriedly draped a pelt on Rihaku, whose nose was dripping. His eyes look like he wanted to say something but couldn't talk back.

"Can you please relay to the warehouse man to please stop smoking in the warehouse?"

Maomao informed them about the probable reason of the fire. It may be speculation, but this was truth.

"Ahh. I will."

Rihaku replied with a relieved face. His face was ghastly pale. No matter how much he trained his body, he should hurry and warm up or he might end up catching a cold. Even though it would be better if he hurried up and returned to his room to warm up, Rihaku stared at Maomao.

"What made this happen?"

The face that floated a question mark asked Maomao how the explosion occurred. Rihaku's subordinates were all making the same face.

Maomao took out the remainders of what she put inside the box from just then. White powder that came out from the jute bag, rode the wind with a rustle and dispersed.

"Flour burns easily. Wheat and buckwheat can catch fire when its floating in the air."

That is what exploded. That was all it was. It was something anyone would understand if they knew about it. It was only because Rihaku didn't know about it.

"Ya know much about that huh."

"Yes, I did it often."

"Did it often?"

Rihaku and his subordinates exchanged glances, completely lost. That is true, it was something they would never be related to, jobs like those where they would be covered in flour in a single cramped room. Maomao was careful since she blew up a rented room at the Rokushoukan.

“Please be careful you don’t catch a cold. If you catch it, the medicine from a man called Ruomen from the prostitution quarter is very effective.”

She didn’t forget her business activities either. He might go buy some while he was on the way to visit Pairin. As her dad didn’t have a merchant’s heart, Maomao had to do this much, otherwise there is the possibility of him missing his meals.

(It ate up a lot more time than I thought.)

Maomao carried the basket of wastepaper and headed to the rubbish incinerator. Since it was nearby, she thought to quickly hand it over to the manservant and then go back.

(Ah, I took it with me.)

Maomao noticed that the pipe shard she picked up from before was in her collar. Though it was slightly burnt, it was a relatively first-class thing. It was too fine for a warehouse man to have.

(Could this have been something important, I wonder.)

It could be returned to what it used to be if the carved section was cleaned and a new mouthpiece was affixed. Since she heard that though there were wounded people, no one died, she was sure its owner was getting treated for their injuries. Though it might be the detestable thing that became the cause of the fire, it could become money if it is sold. Even if they are dismissed for being the cause of the fire, no doubt they would receive it if it can become money.

Maomao put the ivory carving that sullied by soot into her bosom for the time being. *I have to work this evening*, she thought as she handed the wastepaper over to the manservant.

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1. An unobtainable goal. Something out of reach.

CHAPTER 4

BOREDOM

(There really isn't much in winter.)

Maomao was sitting cross-legged in her room, groaning with her arms crossed. The plants she gathered in the morning during her work intervals were a paltry amount, still not enough for her to compound. There was nothing she could do about it, so she washed them, and hung them off to dry on the walls of her room.

Since she did this sort of thing every day since coming to the Imperial Court, Maomao's room has turned into quite a questionable place. She thought it was an exceptional room for one provided for live-in maidservants, but cramped was still cramped. It was around the same size as the room that was provided to her in the Inner Palace. Even so, the current room was cumbersome – as in the Jade Palace, she could use the kitchen if she got permission and she could compound at once since ingredients were abundant there.

(Well then, what should I do?)

Maomao was used to it, but it seemed like this room reeked quite a bit. It was like the saying 'Good medicine tastes bitter', there were a lot of medicinal herbs with strong bitterness and stench. Although the rooms beside Maomao's were currently unoccupied, seeing how the maidservants blatantly quicken their steps when they pass by, it seemed to be the case. *They'll eventually complain about it*, Maomao understood with her experience she had so far.

(I wonder if there's a somewhat good place that's unoccupied.)

Like this, she can't compound comfortably. The beautiful fungus she specially received would spoil.

Maomao gazed at the paulownia box she placed with great importance on top of her luggage. Sealed with a silk cord, it was a grass that grew from a bug as a source.

Maomao, seeing that, felt herself inadvertently break into a wide smile. Her face ended up cramping from the eerie grinning.

(Not good not good.)

The other day, she ended up raising her voice like this, and her door was kicked in protest by the people who lived two rooms down. *Don't make a strange sound in the middle of the night, I can't sleep*, that sort of thing.

Maomao eased her slackened cheeks with her fingers and went to lie down on the bed. A maidservant's job was early in the morning. She had to wake before the rooster crowed. The person she served was the beautiful noble one, although he lost his important thing. She must not hurt his good mood.

Maomao heaped several layers of clothes as a thin cover on top of her, and closed her eyes.



"Is your current room cramped?"

The beautiful eunuch said as he ate his morning porridge. Maomao blinked once at Jinshi's words.

"The room you provided me is good enough for a maidservant's hospitality."

What she really meant but didn't say was "Indeed, it's cramped. If it's possible, I want to move into a room adjacent to a well that has a kitchen range." Even Maomao knew that much.

"Really?"

"..."

The eunuch, who still wasn't fully awake, was enjoying his breakfast, clothes slightly dishevelled. His messy hair that was bundled up simply was unnecessarily seductive. Maomao knew very well why there was only, aside from herself, Gaoshun, and another person, a middle-aged court lady, in this eunuch's room. If it were women, they would rush in, affected by his seductiveness and get infatuated. If it were men, they would ignore and push down the gender barrier. He really has a sinful nature.

(He's kinda like a bug in mating season.)

There are female bugs that release a mysterious scent to attract males. Tens, hundreds of males are lured and gather in response to a single female. Maomao has also caught some using that nature to gather bugs that can be medicinal ingredients. If she thought of it that way, he might have a very interesting nature.

(If I can collect that scent and make it into a perfume, I might be able to sell that.)

In that manner, she ended up looking at the raw materials for a love potion, uh, Jinshi. It was a bad habit that her consciousness will jump to the other side when she thought of other things. Because of that, there were many times where she often lost track of the conversation around her. Even though she wasn't listening; it was like only her head was listening, nodding along, which was all the more puzzling.

"I can prepare a new room if you would like."

(Hah?)

Jinshi, who looked somehow satisfied, asked the middle-aged court lady, Suiren, for seconds of the porridge. Suiren, with a calm expression, dished out a new bowl of porridge, added vinegar, and passed it over.

I don't know what's happening, but he's preparing a better room for me? Maomao accepted, and met eyes with Gaoshun who was clutching his head. The world-wise person, who constantly looked tired, looked like he wanted to say something to Maomao, but she only wrinkled her brows.

(I won't understand what you want to say unless you tell me clearly.)

Maomao thought that, but said nothing, seeing as she had a lot of times where she didn't say enough too.



"It's a godsend that you came here. Frankly, my knees are hurting in winter. My age is wearing on me."

Suiren was smiling cheerfully as she spoke to Maomao. Certainly, it is excessive overwork for one court lady to work in Jinshi's large building. Moreover, it'll wear out various parts of the body for someone who's past her fifties. For human lifespan, if

there are people who live for a hundred years, there are those who die as soon as they are born. The typical thinking is that living fifty years is good enough.

“There were many times a new child has come in. Well, they can’t continue for various reasons though. For that, it should be fine if it’s Shaomao.”

Since Gaoshun called Maomao that, this good-natured court lady called her that too. Though her mouth moved a lot, the skilled court lady was also quick at her job, her hands never stopped moving. The silver tableware was completely polished in a blink of an eye. And when she was done, she moved onto cleaning the floor. No matter how she looked, as it was a maidservant’s job, Maomao entered to stop her,

“Probably, with this, we won’t make it in time for the work that starts from midday.”

And she said that. As the maidservants and court ladies that were employed before messed up that, Suiren did all of the cleaning in the room.

(Theft?)

Even Maomao can easily imagine that it was probably a money theft. However, Suiren said, it wasn’t just losing things, sometimes they gained things.

“As you would expect, anyone would find it unpleasant if you find underwear you have never seen before among your belongings.”

Furthermore, it looked like it was sewn on with human hair instead of thread. At the response that was completely outside her expectation, Maomao broke out in goosebumps.

“That’s dreadful.”

“Yes, it’s dreadful.”

Maomao thought, *it’ll be so much better if he lived with even his face covered*, as she diligently wiped the window frames.

After she finished cleaning Jinshi's private room and was done with her late meal, she went to clean his office next. Honestly, it happened that cleaning the office was easy as it was really a simple structure. But since there was no way of her cleaning the floor in front of Mr Big-shot, having to take care around that was difficult. And so, it was common for her to choose to clean when Jinshi went to the Inner Palace or another official's place. Other times, she went about doing odd-jobs to kill time.

(I wonder what should I do today.)

It happened that Maomao had free time since Jinshi had a visitor in his office. During these times, there are many times she pretended she had work and went out to take a stroll in the Imperial Court.

(I pretty much covered the west side huh)

A map spread out in Maomao's mind. If she could, she wanted to go around the east side, but she ended up somehow hesitant. The military was in the east side. What would happen if a maidservant was sneakily weeding in the area with lots of military officers? *Wouldn't I get mistaken as a spy and get detained?* she thought.

(Besides, if we're talking about the military....)

Inadvertently, Maomao gave an expression, all her face muscles cramping. That was the only reluctant reason, but on the other hand, she anticipated that there might be rare medicinal herbs in the places she hasn't strolled through.

As she crossed her arms and groaned, she felt something hit the back of her head.

(What?)

Holding the back of her head, she turned around with a dubious expression. There was a tall court lady with a cool expression. It was a foreign-looking court lady with noble features.

(I think I've seen her before.)

Maomao recalled the faces of the court ladies that was involved with her a couple of days ago. She was among that group.

She only had the barest minimum of make-up done, but her precisely drawn eyebrows

were peculiar. Even though she had full, rich lips, the rouge was thinly drawn like a line.

(It's a waste but the make-up is eager.)

Her frame and raw materials were first-class articles, but with the make-up, she became overly refined. If her brows were thinned and softened, her lips drawn fully with pale red, her hair tied up flamboyantly, she could be counted as one of the rare beauties among the flowers of the Inner Palace. Maomao, who gazed for a long time at the figures that become night butterflies¹, her aesthetic sense saw through the sloppy girl for this reason. Most of the people in the Imperial Court probably think that girl was a rough diamond that can become that kind of beauty.

For this reason, there was a reason to her grouping in a clique with the court ladies and appearing before Maomao. Are the beautiful court ladies quickly falling in love at first sight with capable military officers or civil officials and marrying? Or they are picking on their own court ladies? Which one was it? Rarely, there were women who live skilfully, but that was more a woman with a high prostitute disposition rather than a court lady.

(This woman is quite a vixen, isn't she?)

The court lady walked past, as if to say that she won't waste any word to the maidservant. Was she declaring, "Don't dawdle in such a place?" There was the faint scent of sandalwood when she happened to pass by.

Maomao, with a sudden realisation, looked at the court lady's back. And then she looked at the direction whence she came from.

(A military officer's mistress?)

The court lady came from the direction of the military gate. Certainly, if she was going to visit the military, simple make-up would be prudent. Even if it was to not go into the backside of the alleyways of the prostitution quarter, it would be better to avoid the places where peerless beauties walk about around vigorous military officers.

(Let's stop for today.)

Maomao made a right-about face and decided to return to Jinshi's office. Maomao, with her interest waned, thought it was better if the owner of the office went out soon.

1. The prostitutes.

CHAPTER 5

DISGUISE

“You know a lot about make up?”

(Just what is this about?)

Maomao tilted her head.

Jinshi had said that. He was back in his private room, his official duties over. Suiren was helping him into his change of clothes.

Certainly, she learnt how to use make-up, reluctant or not, having been brought up in the prostitution quarter. Besides drugs, she also made cosmetics before. It can be said she knew much about it.

“Is it a gift for someone?”

“Not quite. It’s for me.”

“ ... ”

Maomao looked at him like she was peering into the bottomless abyss. It certainly was hollow.

Seeing that expression,

“What are you imagining?”

Jinshi said. Even though he said it, she could only imagine it as he said it.

(He doesn’t need it.)

Maomao imagined Jinshi with make-up. His current appearance was already beautiful like a heavenly person. He only had to draw a scarlet line on the corner of his eyes, put on rouge and paste a huadian¹ on his forehead; just that much would be enough to topple the country. There were a lot of absurd wars in history; several of them were instigated by country toppling beauties.

“...you want to go as far as to ruin the country?”

“How did it come to that!”

Jinshi, after putting his arms through his outer garment, sat down on his chair. Maomao poured some porridge from the pot. An abalone porridge seasoned with a savoury flavour, it was overwhelmingly delicious though she only helped herself to one bite for food tasting. Since Suiren will split the rest with Maomao after Jinshi was done with eating, she wanted him to pick up the pace and finish eating before the pot got cold.

“The thing you have. How did you make that face powder?”

Jinshi said, gesturing at the area around her nose.

(Is it about that huh.)

Maomao got the picture. His beauty was superfluous even at the best of times; he probably had no need to get anymore sparkly than this.

“This is dried clay powder that is mixed in oil. I blend in charcoal and rouge when I want to make the colour extremely dark.”

“Hoh. Can you make some immediately?”

For the time being, Maomao took out a clam vessel from her bosom. It contained thoroughly kneaded clay.

“I only have this much on me right now, but if you allow me one evening I can quickly make some more.”

Jinshi picked up the clam. He scooped out the contents with a finger and smeared it on the back of his hand. Maomao felt that the colour she compounded for herself was slightly too dark on the white porcelain skin that was unthinkable for a man.

“Will it be Jinshi-sama who is using it?”

Jinshi smiled tenderly at Maomao’s words. Though he neither denied nor affirmed it, but it wouldn’t be wrong for her to take it as an affirmative.

“It would be convenient if there is medicine that can change one’s face though.”

At the Jinshi who said that jokingly,

“It’s not that it doesn’t exist, but you’ll be left with that face for the rest of your life.”

Even just applying lacquer on your face will be sufficient, Maomao said.

“True that.”

Jinshi said with a bitter smile. As one would expect, this was troubling, and if Maomao did such things, she would be surely be torn apart by everyone around her and turned into animal feed.

“It’s not that there isn’t such a technique though.”

“In that case, I’ll leave it to you.”

Jinshi smiled as if he was anticipating it. and ate his porridge. The chicken that was grilled to perfection looked delicious, but there surely wouldn’t be any leftovers for her. He passed the plate to Suiren with the last bite left on it.

“Turn me into a completely different person.”

(I wonder what he is planning.)

Maomao wasn’t reckless to ask that much. Even if she knew, it wasn’t something that would be beneficial to her. She only have to prepare it obediently as she was told. Maomao told him, “I understand.” She looked at Jinshi who continued his dinner, wanting him to quickly finish eating. The abalone porridge looked truly delicious.



The next day, Maomao prepared a face powder that darker than what she usually made, and stuffed several other things she might need into the cloth bag. She had turned up earlier than usual, but the lights in Jinshi’s private room were already lit. The owner of the room was sitting on the couch in his room, having done with his bath, and Suiren was drying his hair. A luxury only a nobleman can have.

Although the clothes he wore were simpler and more modest than usual, that conduct was a nobleman's.

"...Good morning."

Maomao said to Jinshi with her eyes half-closed.

"Ah. What's wrong? You got up on the wrong side of the bed huh."

"No, I thought that Jinshi-sama is as beautiful as ever."

"Newcomer sarcasm?"

It was just truth that sounded like sarcasm to an extent. She thought that his unravelled hair was glossy, and if she spun his hair right now into fabric, it would surely be first-class silk.

"Did you not want to do this from the start?"

"It's nothing like that. Does Jinshi-sama really want to turn into a different person?"

"I already told you last night."

"In that case, excuse me."

Maomao briskly approached Jinshi. She gripped his sleeves, pressed onto his face. Suiren, who was combing his hair, said "Oh my," and left the room in haste. Gaoshun, who had come in sometime without her noticing, also withdrew from the room, pushing on Suiren's back.

"Wh-what are you suddenly doing?"

Jinshi said, voice slightly hitched.

(He doesn't understand anything at all.)

It was Maomao's character to go beyond what is asked of her. She couldn't settle down unless she worked above and beyond. For that reason, she prepared various things today to turn Jinshi into a different person.

“Commoners do not burn such high-class incense.”

Jinshi's clothes were the ordinary wear of townspeople and, at best, junior government officials. It shouldn't smell like the highest grade aromatic wood that was shipped from across the seas. Maomao's nose, which was used to tell apart medicinal herbs and poisonous plants, was more sensitive than other people. The reason she was in a bad mood when she entered the room was because of this incense. It was probably Suiren's touch, but honestly, it was an annoyance.

“Do you know how you can tell apart the honoured guests of the brothel?”

“...I don't. Something like their figure or the clothes they are wearing?”

“There are those, but there is one more thing. Their smell.”

The sweet-smelling fat guests were sick but had money. The ones that were covered with many kinds of terrible perfume generally wander between streetwalkers so there were high chances of them having venereal diseases. The ones who smelt like livestock despite being young were dirty from not bathing, and so on. Most first time guests who come to the Rokushoukan are chased out, but occasionally some would satisfy the madam's eyes and are let in. Roughly, those who would unmistakably become honoured guests are those who satisfy the madam's requirements.

“For the time being, you should change into different clothes, and one more thing.”

Maomao went to the bathroom and filled a bucket with the still warm water. She brought it to the room Jinshi was in. On the way, Suiren and Gaoshun were looking at Maomao uneasily. Maomao took the opportunity and asked Gaoshun for a favour. To arrange for something else to the prepared clothes.

Maomao took out a small leather pouch from the cloth bag she brought in. She stuck her finger in it, and came away with thick oil. She dissolved that in the bucket.

“We must first turn that silk into linen.”

After passing her hands through the water in the bucket, she ran her fingers through Jinshi's hair. The lustre of his glossy flowing hair was lost every time her fingers passed through it. She planned to comb it carefully, but maybe it was the difference in her experience in hand combing, Jinshi looked more unsettled that it was when Suiren

was combing for him.

(I mustn't snag his hair.)

Maomao naturally ended up getting nervous as well. It escaped her mind at times, but if Maomao were to hurt this person's mood, her head could be estranged from her body.

She bundled up the hair that had certainly transformed from glossy silk to rough linen. She used cloth scraps instead of cord for his hair tie. Anything would do as it was just used to tie up hair.

When she returned from putting away the bucket and washing her hands, Gaoshun had prepared what she asked of him. As expected of the capable attendant.

"Are you really fine with this?"

Gaoshun looked at her with a really uneasy expression. Suiren who was standing next to him, made a blatant look of disgust when she saw what he prepared. Well, it would be something hard to believe for a court lady like her. What Gaoshun brought was worn out commoner clothes that was slightly large. It had been washed once, but some parts of the cloth was thinned and there were still traces of the owner's body odour on it.

"It would be better if it stunk more."

Maomao said when she took a whiff of the garment, and Suiren covered her cheeks with both hands in disbelief. Gaoshun, looked like he wanted to say something, but since he was holding back with his hands, it looked like he won't say anything. Like that, Gaoshun's brows were distinctly deepened with wrinkles.

She was sorry for Suiren, but Maomao had much more planned to twist the woman's mind.

"Jinshi-sama, take off your clothes please."

"...Ah, aaah."

Jinshi replied, slightly hesitant.

Maomao, paying no mind, looked around the room for something she could use. She prepared several towels, and this time took out a bleached cotton cloth from the cloth

bag.

“Excuse me, can you two assist me too?”

She dragged in the two people who were caught in suspense watching, and got Gaoshun to hold onto the towel and wrap Jinshi’s naked body with it. Though the person who was like a celestial maiden had already lost his most important thing, his upper body was made of muscles that have attained symmetry. She would expect that it might be cold to just be wearing underwear, he was just wearing ^{trousers} hakama. As she thought the room was warm, she added charcoal to the brazier as an apology.

Gaoshun rolled the towel around him, Suiren held onto it, and Maomao wreathed the bleached cotton cloth and fixed it. After she wreathed the bleached cotton cloth, there was the silhouette of a misshaped protruding stomach.

Wearing the largish clothes on top of that was perfect. The slightly off-balance body figure was completed. The fragrance that was left on his body should be erased when he wore the clothes. Only Jinshi’s face was the usual; it was a very strange sight.

“Well then, shall we get on to next thing?”

Maomao took out the face powder she freshly kneaded yesterday. She carefully smeared the stuff that was slightly darker than Jinshi’s skin with her finger.

(It’s unnecessarily pretty even when I’m feeling it closely.)

She ended up looking and admiring his poreless skin, let alone any facial hair. As she smeared his face uniformly, she next added a slightly darker colour. She added spots on his face and made bags under his eyes. Taking the opportunity, she tried to add a mole between his eyes. She thickened his willowy brows slightly, drawing them so that the sizes of the left and right were different.

There was a way to deceive the ruggedness of his face, but when she looked closely, it would expose the make-up so she gave it a miss. It would be possible that it would arise suspicion that a woman did a man’s make-up in any case.

Instead, she made him hold cotton in both cheeks, deceiving his features. Gaoshun and Suiren looked at her questioningly, *Going that far?*, but she wasn’t done with just that. She smeared the left-over face powder on various places on his body, making yellow spots. She filled under his fingernails with face powder, making dirty hands.

(White-bait hands² really can't do huh.)

Just like his upper body, Jinshi's hand were fine male hands. She thought he normally carried writing brushes and chopsticks, but his palm was firm to touch. Though she has never seen it before, she supposed he did sword fighting or staff fighting. It was originally something that wasn't required of a eunuch. However, Maomao wasn't so reckless to go as far as to investigating that, so she indifferently applied on the back of his hand with dirty townspeople things.

"Is it done?"

Jinshi asked, looking at Maomao who was rubbing her forehead as she put away the make-up tools. There was no beautiful eunuch there, just a commoner man with an unhealthy face. He had neat looks, but he had a distended stomach and yellow spots on his face and hands, an unhealthy lifestyle from the shadows – he was expected to look in that way.

"...Well, you're really a young master?"

"Please stop it with the young master."

Suiren really couldn't hide her astonishment even though she should have watched it from the beginning to the end. This way, no one from the royal palace should discover it is Jinshi with just a look. If it is just a look.

Maomao took out the bamboo pipe that was left inside the cloth bag. She pulled off the stopper, poured it in a cup and passed it to Jinshi. Jinshi grimaced when he saw the contents. Probably due to its peculiar sharp smell. It was a blend of several kinds of stimulants – honesty, it wasn't something that could be said as delicious.

"What is this?"

"The finishing touch. Please lick it slowly like you are wetting your lips and swallow it. It will make your lips and throat swell and change your voice. It's better than stuffing your mouth."

There might be people who would notice if his sweet, honey-like voice wasn't changed even if his appearance and smell was different. You must be thorough if you have to do it.

“It’s very acrid, but since it’s not poison, be at ease. Also, Jinshi-sama’s posture is good, so please walk hunchbacked with a bowleg.”

“” ...”

Leaving the stunned three people behind, Maomao went to start to packing up in haste.

She was granted free time today after this and she will be taking a holiday until tomorrow. It’s been a while since she returned to the prostitution quarter; she was thinking of doing the compounding she liked very much.

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1. 花鈿, A coloured mark, usually red, that is pasted on the middle on the forehead. Common designs are flowers. Popular during the Tang Dynasty.
 2. 白魚の手, Pretty hands that are fair-skinned and slender.

CHAPTER 6

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CERTAIN MILITARY OFFICER

Rihaku put his bulging wallet into his breast pocket and continued along the road towards the prostitution quarter. It was his first holiday since he got paid the other day. He, the military officer, lived in the lodging house but in his holidays, he set out for town. His destination – the brothel that had the Rose¹.

There was a bounce in his steps today. Just then, he had met up with a court lady acquaintance. The girl called Maomao, her looks weren't much to speak about, but her connections were spread out surprisingly far. She was close to Pairin, the Rose, to the point of calling her 'older sister'. Maomao was just about the pass through the gates, carrying a small cloth bag. She said it had been a while she got a holiday and was going home to the prostitution quarter. If so, that meant she will inevitably greet her older sister. A tea party might even ensue in the lobby of the Rokushoukan.

This was a good chance for Rihaku to see the face of the flower, as his usual visits to the Rokushoukan usually end with him just drinking tea with a *kamuro*. In other words, he had an ulterior motive to meeting Pairin by taking out Maomao.

And so, it was good he was heading for that, but the sun was still just crossing the meridian. Guests only come in when the sun is hidden in the prostitution quarter. They might open in the daytime, but he heard from a *kamuro* that Pairin was a night owl who wakes up close to evening. Even if he went, it was still too early.

"Ah well."

Rihaku decided to kill some time at a nearby eating house.



"Customer-san, what would you like?"

A girl who gave off a wanton impression called out to him in an over-familiar voice.

Though she conducted herself like a waitress, but her gaze was appraising Rihaku. The interior of the shop was spacious, but it was dim and there were few guests scattered about. There were those who were whispering amongst each other, and some who were being excessively clingy to the waitresses.

Rihaku thought he made a slight mistake by entering this shop.

Though the location was a fair distance away from the prostitution quarter, this shop seemed to have that kind of function. The ground floor was an eating house, the first floor an inn where waitresses will guide customers into the rooms and don't come out, that kind of shop.

It was a shop that honestly couldn't go public.

What this shop did was the same as a brothel in the prostitution quarter. The problem with it is that it wasn't a shop that was publicly approved. A shop would gain more revenue than just selling meals by selling flowers. In that case, the tax rate it came under will also change.

Hypothetically, if Rihaku was obstinate, he would probably flash evidence of tax evasion and go for the merit. However, he wasn't that type of person, only ordering what the person sitting beside him was eating, as it looked delicious. Rihaku knew that this sort of thing was required for a promotion, but he didn't think that far. His character comes from physical strength and even if he did a poor job of showing tax evasion, it'll be a pain if he was glared at by the official who presided over it. If he did it, the civil official he was acquainted with who had a sense of justice will just grumble about it when he drinks heavily.

The waitress, understanding that Rihaku was only here to eat, fixed her flirtatious attitude and returned to the kitchen with light footsteps. Women who work in these kinds of places are really quick at switching.

Rihaku put his feet on the table and regarded everyone around him with a glance. The guests were a duo who were flirting with a waitress, a trio who were talking amongst themselves, a duo who were eating at the seat beside his, and finally Rihaku on his own.

Oh, Rihaku's eyes were drawn to the seat with the trio. One among them were drumming his fingers on the table. There was a small piece of paper under his fingers. When a waitress came over with a second helping of alcohol, she took the empty wine bottle and retreated. When she did so, the scrap of paper that was left on the table was

gone.

I see now, Rihaku thought.

Of course, a disgraceful shop gathered disgraceful things. Aside from meals and flowers, this shop also sold information. He listened intently to the trio who were chatting.

“How are the sales recently?”

“Well, no changes. Just the price of linen is a little higher, I guess.”

Extremely normal merchant conversation. There wasn't anything suspicious about it. It would have been fine if he let it go with just that, but he listened out of habit. He ended up trying to sound for secret language from the conversation.

Rihaku believed that the current society wasn't a bad era, but nonetheless, there were those who spoke of discontent. Even speculations about who was the cause of the warehouse explosion the other day was rampant. In the end, it was determined that cause of the fire was due to the warehouse man's careless smoking.

That sayin', Rihaku took out a certain object from his breast pocket. It was something Maomao, who he met, had handed over to him some time ago. It was a pipe with ivory carving. That skilful court lady said that it might be the warehouse man's, and polished the carving, making it beautiful. She said it can be used again if you affix a new handle.

“It's fine if ya don't give it back. Ya could have just sold it for gold.”

Though he said something along those lines, Rihaku already went to ask the person in charge of the warehouse for the owner's house. Even he thought he was soft-hearted himself, it couldn't be helped that his character was like that, so he can't be one to say about other people. He thought he would try going there after eating.

“But I have to say this is made really nicely.”

Ivory was the tusk of an animal from a distant country. Of course, it wasn't something that the common people can easily obtain. If they lost such a valuable thing, they'll surely go looking for it.

“Okay, customer-san. Thanks for waiting.”

The waitress brought over a bowl of warm porridge. The hearty porridge looked delicious; it was made of good chicken stock and was thoroughly mixed with small pieces of vegetables. There was also fried chicken wings and a vegetable, nut and pork stir-fry – it was a course that you know the cooking is good from the smell alone.

“Looks tasty.”

“Indeed, it’ll make you really robust.”

The waitress winked at him, giving a vulgar smile. Seems like she was seducing him. This girl’s face and body wasn’t bad. If it was before, he might have crooked his finger at her, but it was different now. Since his encounter with the ethereal woman who appeared like she was lying sprawled on top of the lotus flower, Rihaku’s ideal had shot through the roof. The current him, having savoured that paradise, cannot be satisfied with a woman that could be found anywhere.

“Time to dig in.”

When the waitress saw that Rihaku didn’t react and started eating, she went back to being rude again. As though that woman still hasn’t caught a customer today, she moved on to the duo who sat in the next seat.

There were two plump men over there. One of them looked excessively unhealthy. There were bags under his eyes, his face was swollen. He didn’t eat at all, just drinking tea. The other man ate up all of the delicious looking food.

It’s a waste to not eat such delicious food, Rihaku thought as he moved his chopsticks.

Before long, the trio finished calculating their bill. Rihaku licked his spoon; he didn’t think to do anything even though he noticed that for the amount of alcohol they had, the bill was large. He just took in their faces with a sidelong glance.

And then, a little while after the trio left, the duo who was eating also went out. The waitress, who missed out on catching customers, gave Rihaku with an exasperated look. Seems like she wanted to him to quickly finish eating and clean up.



“Just what is this about?”

Rihaku was walking on the street, breathing heavily. A while ago, he had gone to deliver the pipe after he finished eating. When he did so – how about that – it was the former warehouse man who came out, unshaven faced, stinking of alcohol. The moment he showed him the ivory pipe, the other man declared, “I don’t want it. Chuck that damn thing out as you please.”

Rihaku’s current attire wasn’t official robes but casual clothes. He had taken care of his basic personal appearance so to go meet Pairin, but as he wasn’t wearing the belt and stone that denoted his official rank, the former warehouse man saw him as a mere messenger. He was treated with a rude form.

When he went to ascertain whether it was an important thing, he got, “Heck would I know, that was a gift. I only got it because it was given to me, but I can’t use it at all. It flat out doesn’t light.” Rihaku could only tilt his head.

Where was the fellow who thoughtlessly gave away the ivory item? And furthermore, to a person who didn’t understand the value of this pipe.

Rihaku, thinking it was kind of a waste, explained that the pipe was made from ivory. The other man laughed out of his nose, saying, “Hah? You’re kidding me.” He said that the one who gave it to him was a mere court lady, who asked *do you want it or not?*, and simply gave it to him. Seems he meekly received it since the thing wasn’t bad and looked stylish.

After hearing what the former warehouse man said, there was a point that Rihaku was stuck on.

Though this man seemed strangely apathetic to this pipe, it looked like he was made to expect that this pipe was connected to being the starter of the warehouse fire. Because of that, though the warehouse man was still alive with his whole body covered in burns, he was also fired.

Rihaku had planned to hand the ivory pipe over to the man, but decided not to, seeing as the man said he didn’t want it.

He wanted to investigate what was bothering him.

Why did the court lady give it to him?, Rihaku tilted his head.

The pipe that was given. The court lady who gave it away. The warehouse man. The grain warehouse. And the explosion.

As Rihaku sensed that there was something newly suspicious about the incident he thought was already solved, he headed towards the prostitution quarter. He walked into a deserted alleyway, avoiding the main street, to take a little short-cut. Since the prostitution quarter was in the south, he should get there faster if he continued walking in a southerly direction.

Amid that, footsteps resounded in the narrow road. Rihaku's ears were good, to the point of catching the conversation of a different seat in the bar, to the degree of knowing how much the customers paid from just the sound of money. On top of that, to the extent of being asked many times, "Are you a f*cking dog?"

There were five people – three in front and two at the back. He could hear them from one house over. If people were running across town, it could be that they were being chased a money lender, or they were being chased a stray dog – none of the reasons could be good.

He involuntarily scaled the wall before him, going right into private property. The rundown house didn't look like it was inhabited for many years. No one should complain even if he went in. He sneaked over and peeked through the crack in the wall.

He recognised those faces. They were the customers who were eating at the bar a while ago. The trio being chased were the fellows who bought information, and the others were the plump duo who had been eating.

The duo cornered the trio. The number of people were reversed, but Rihaku understood. The duo moved more sharply than their bodies suggested. The man who looked ill was also like that, but another person, the man who didn't stand out, dexterously constricted the collar of one of the men who were running away. He was whispering into the caught man's ears – Rihaku's hearing wasn't that good of course.

I stepped into a dangerous place huh, Rihaku thought. He pulled back his face, keeping his back to the wall, and closed his eyes quietly. Kill his presence, concentrate only on hearing.

From the fragmentary, "Who's instigated this?", "That aside...", he heard common interrogative questions. Seems that the other person, the man with the terrible complexion, was standing watch over the remaining two people. Every time the two

people who were clinging to the wall made any strange movements, he heard a sharp metallic sound.

Rihaku didn't know what kind of circumstance this was – in this sort of case, it would be safer to do nothing. If he chased people and interrogated them in a deserted place like this, it can be said he was wicked just like them. He didn't know who is correct, who is not correct, even if either were not correct. Aside from getting involved with pretty older sisters, he didn't feel like helping even when he looked at rascals involved with rascals.

Of course, he had to step in if it went as far as killing, but that didn't seem to be necessary. The plump man, finished with the interrogation, spoke to the other man as if it was nothing.

“Let's go back.”

Just as the duo was going to leave as though nothing happened, one stopped in his tracks. Right where Rihaku stood, separated by a thin wall.

With a thud, a blade pierced through right next to where Rihaku's face was.

“What is it?”

“No, I felt there was something there.”

It might have been my imagination, he heard a hoarse voice. The voice that sounded like he caught a cold belonged to the man with eye bags. Why was it he had a feeling he heard that voice before from somewhere? However, he thought he remembered it but he couldn't.

Rihaku propped his hand over his heart, and waited for his pulse to settle.

It was when the duo left, and even the remaining trio were also gone, that he finally let out a huge breath. He ran his fingers back his sweaty hair and sighed. Aside from getting into fights, holding his breath and staying still wasn't his thing. Even so, he prided on the fact that his swordsmanship teacher praised his way of holding his breath like a wild animal. He took the impact from being unexpectantly noticed.

“What's up with those people?”

That was somewhat tiring, he thought as he raised his back and brushed the dust off his buttocks.

The sky was dyed red, the time when the night butterflies start to flap their wings. The beautiful prostitutes would not go for guests with clammy faces. Rihaku slapped both his cheeks. To meet with the beautiful Rose, he must change his mood.

Work was work, play was play. It was important to properly differentiate them.

1. 大輪の薔薇, the big bloomed rose. It's such a mouthful for a title in English, so I shorted it to Rose. Thoughts? Btw, Rifa is also called this but I translated it as Large Rose before, idk it still sounds really weird.

CHAPTER 7

INNER PALACE LESSON

“What could be happening?”

“Beats me.”

Gaoshun, who was asking, was curtly shot down by Jinshi’s stark reply.

They were in the front of the auditorium within the Inner Palace.

The high ranked consorts were currently studying about the duty they must accomplish as consorts.

Around them, the eunuchs and attendant court ladies who had been shut out were making the same expressions as Jinshi.

Some even planted their ears on the door, curious about the secretiveness of it all.

What in the world could this be about?

The sole reason for their curiosity was this: why was the lecturer a young court lady with freckles?

This began ten days ago.



When Maomao returned to her post, her short break over, she found a grave-faced Jinshi. For some reason, he was looking at Maomao with a serious expression.

“The new Pure Consort has arrived. It looks like they want to train the consorts.”

“Is that so?”

With a half-hearted reply, Maomao started to scrub the floor. She cleaned like she was stealing a maidservant’s job, like it was her parent’s enemy. This was her daily routine since becoming Jinshi’s room maid.

Maomao was aware that other jobs were available to her, but since she had only done maidservant jobs, she honestly had no clue on what she should do. Cleaning was fine for the time being so she did it with gusto. Jinshi would occasionally look displeased about it, but Maomao thought it wasn't necessary as far as he didn't order her to do something

Jinshi's room originally had the barest minimum of servants. Even if there wasn't Maomao, Suiren, who was Jinshi's old housekeeper, would be sufficient. She felt bad for stealing the hardworking old housekeeper's job, so aside from the jobs that were strenuous for the legs and back, Maomao thought she ought to act knowing her own territory.

Jinshi crouched down to meet Maomao's eyes. In his hand was some scroll.

"It's about becoming a lecturer."

"Heeh, for who?"

"You."

Maomao looked at Jinshi, her eyes glazing over unintentionally. Even if she was now a court lady under his beck and call, it was difficult to stop looking at him like rubbish she lost interest in. Seeing that, Jinshi made a wordless expression.

"Don't joke."

"You think I'm joking with you?"

Jinshi dangled the document before her eyes.

Maomao squinted at it. Something quite inconvenient to her was written on it.

"Oi, don't look away."

"I wonder what it is about."

"You were studying it just then."

"I think your mind is playing tricks on you."

Jinshi unrolled the document and pointed to the section that was inconvenient to Maomao. He stabbed at it with his finger repeatedly. How annoying.

“Right here. That’s the name of the person who recommended you.”

“ ... ”

Jinshi was pointing to “*Able Consort Rifa*” that was written there.

Ah crap, Maomao thought.



“I don’t know.”

At first, Maomao repeatedly feigned complete ignorance, but after receiving Consort Gyokuyou’s signature right after Consort Rifa’s, there was obviously no way of her ignoring that. She could imagine the red-haired consort preparing it with a gleeful smile. The sum of the reward was also courteously specified.

Maomao sighed, resigned. She sent a letter to her family and made preparations regardless. Her family in this case wasn’t the pharmacist side, but the brothel that took care of her like family.

A couple of days later, the package was delivered with the cost that the hag demanded from her. *Quite overcharged*, Maomao thought, but she added an extra line and handed it over to Jinshi. He had looked at it with begrudging acceptance although he was sceptical, but then his housekeeper appeared at the side, looked at the indicated sum with a smile, took it from Jinshi and handed it back to Maomao.

(Not bad.)

Suiren almost handled looking after Jinshi’s daily necessities alone. Someone like her would know about that much.

It might be difficult for the naïve young master.

She reluctantly showed him the original cost and he agreed with some hesitation. He had haggled as she would expect, but as this would result in Maomao paying with her

own money, she wanted him to stop.

When the package was brought over, Maomao pushed Gaoshun aside and seized it. Jinshi looked at it restlessly, his demeanour somewhat like a dog, but Maomao never unwrapped the seal and carried it out with the cart.

She politely refused Gaoshun who came asking, "Shall I assist you?", and took it back to her room.

Jinshi had commanded her to show him, but when she fixed him with a wide glowering stare, he retreated without a word.

No way was she going to show him the important teaching materials.



And so, on the very day.

The prepared auditorium was quite spacious – it can probably fit three hundred people. During the time of the previous emperor, it had been used for maidservants without rooms to sleep in when the number of inner palace court ladies suddenly increased. It is hardly ever used nowadays. It was a waste, but demolishing it even more so.

(It doesn't need to be this spacious.)

She wasn't teaching something that was big deal, but why was a bustling crowd gathered here? Lots of onlooking maidservants surrounded them in the distance. Middle-ranked to high-ranked consorts and their followers make up most of the ones gathered around the auditorium.

Looks like that today's lesson was important to the consorts.

"I'm telling you people, but only high ranked consorts will be taking this class."

The consorts and court ladies, hearing Jinshi's words, looked like they were dejected, no, more enraptured.

It seemed that around half of them were here just to see Jinshi; some were satisfied with hearing just his voice, and weakly leaned against the pillars for support. It looked extremely forced, the drama that was taking place, but it wasn't just one or two people

doing that, so she made the distinction that it was like that.

Maomao sometimes thought this eunuch gave off a strange energy, like he was an apparition or something.

She was going to enter the auditorium since it was time, but Jinshi was following right behind her.

Maomao inadvertently parted her lips and narrowed her eyes at him.

“What?”

As he said so, Jinshi’s back was being pushed by Maomao and redirected out of the auditorium.

“Why?”

“Everything from here on is a secret that no one can know. I’ll make an exception for the consorts, but Jinshi-sama will not hear.”

She said, shutting the door and obstructed it with a pole.

With a heavy sigh, she surveyed the inside of the auditorium. There were nine people in the room including Maomao. They were the four high ranked consorts and one of their attendants.

The other side of the door was somehow rowdy with chatter. Must be because she drove Jinshi out. For some reason, she felt that someone was straining their ears listening against the door.

Maomao pushed the cart to stand in the middle of the auditorium, and slowly bowed her head.

“My name is Maomao, and I will be your lecturer today.”

Consort Gyokuyou, who was beautiful as usual, waved her small hands from her sleeves. Honnyan, her attendant maid, scrutinized Maomao with narrowed eyes.

Consort Rifa regained her plump body that was not much different from before. She

looked at Maomao with a calm expression. Her attendant maid was amusing, blanching the moment she saw Maomao.

Consort Riishu was cowering as usual. She might be fussing about the fact that there were three other high ranked consorts with her. Though her attendant maid was also cowering similarly, it was strangely charming to see that she was trying to protect her consort.

And the final consort.

A new face for Maomao.

Coming in after the previous high ranked Consort Ah Duo was a girl who was the same age as Maomao. The new Pure Consort was called Rouran. Her pitch-black hair was arranged up with a *kanzashi* decorated with a feather of a bird from the southern countries. Even her attire made people think of a princess from the southern countries, but her features hailed from the central region. Maomao thought her attendant maid also had the same simple tastes in clothes.

As expected as one who became a consort, she had a befittingly beautiful face. Though she wasn't as bewitching as consort Gyokuyou, nor she was as gorgeous as Consort Rifa.

Different to Consort Riishu, it was a given that she became the emperor's chosen based on her age, but Maomao didn't see a capable person who will break the balance of the inner palace as of now.

(Doesn't concern me.)

Maomao ended her self-introduction simply. She then took out a textbook from her baggage and distributed them to the consorts one by one.

When the consorts accepted them, they each reacted with widened eyes, gleeful smiles, blushed, and wrinkled their brows respectively.

(Hm, I guess so.)

Maomao then took out a tool. Half of them tilted their heads, wondering what it was, and the other half who knew its use, somehow registering what it was, and blushed.

"Everything I tell you from here on is a secret art of women. Please keep it a secret."

Maomao, saying that, asked them to turn to the third page of the text book.



One dual-hourTwo hours ¹later, when Maomao ended the lesson.

(I might have crammed a little too much.)

Even Maomao, who had taught them, was slightly weary. She trudged over to remove the blocking pole from the auditorium door.

“...that was long.”

The beautiful eunuch walked in with a composed air. He looked slightly bad tempered, and for some reason his left ear and cheeks were bright red. Maomao not saying, *Jerk, you were listening in, weren't you*, was kindness.

Jinshi, as soon as he entered the auditorium, made a dumbfounded face.

“What is it?”

“I should be asking you instead.”

Jinshi looked at Maomao with clammy eyes.

“Even if you ask that.”

Maomao, as she had said, only taught the necessary knowledge for consorts in the inner palace. The consorts she taught, their reactions were as followed.

Consort Gyokuyou was saying, “A break from routine,” in high spirits with a cheery expression. The head maid Honnyan accompanied her with the usual tired expression. Maomao paid no mind to it, but it felt like she was being glared at sometimes.

Consort Rifa was slightly blushing. Her fingers moved as though she was ruminating on the lesson. She looked satisfied for some reason. Maomao thought her attendant maid was quite a young lady, when she saw her trembling pale faced with her eyes cast down.

Consort Riishu was thumping her head on the wall in the corner of the auditorium, muttering “Impossible, absolutely impossible,” with an ashen face.

By her side, the court lady who had just become her head maid recently, was stroking her back in concern. That was mostly likely the former food taster girl.

Consort Rouran was staring blankly into space. Maomao had no idea what was in her head.

Maomao finished packing up her things, and downed the water she accepted in a single gulp. She was tired, but she was looking forward to the gift of money she will be getting after this.

Every consort was each holding onto the example she bought in as a teaching aid. A certain thing, they carried it in their arms with great importance. A certain thing, they touched with dread. Whatever that thing was, they cannot ask while it was carefully wrapped up in a wrapping cloth – as she requested them to do it that way.

At that, Jinshi and everyone else who weren’t in the auditorium looked on bewildered.

“Hey, what did you teach?”

When Jinshi asked, Maomao made a distant look,

“Please ask the emperor for his impressions later.”

She replied.

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1. 時辰, jishin, shi2 chen2. Traditional Chinese time, also used by Japan. Officially used up till the Ming Dynasty. A day was divided into 12 double/dual hour periods, starting at 0 and ending at 23.

CHAPTER 8

NAMASU (1)

“Shaomao, may I have a little bit of your time?”

Gaoshun called out to Maomao who had finished her work and was going to return to her room. Jinshi, his master, seemingly tired from today’s job, was preparing for his after-meal bath.

“What is it?”

When Maomao asked, Gaoshun rubbed his chin, as if he was slightly perplexed. Then he said with a sigh.

“There’s something I want you to see.”

The wrinkles on the attendant’s brows today were deeper than usual.



What Gaoshun showed her were documents written on wooden slips. Several linked pieces of wood were spread out on the table.

“These are documents about an old incident.”

It wrote about something from beyond ten years ago, a food poisoning that occurred in a certain store. It was from eating *fugu*.

Maomao gulped reflexively.

(Ahh, I want to eat it.)

Gaoshun looked at Maomao with an expression that said he knew it.

“I’ll be taking you to that kind of restaurant this time.”

But there will be no viscera, he gave her a look emphasising that.

Even though there are specialities where you can enjoy that tingling numbing sensation, while Maomao thought along those lines, she would be eager if she was treated to a restaurant with delicious food.

“What are you getting with this?”

“I had a job a long time ago that had something to do that this incident. I had a discussion with a former colleague on a similar incident that happened recently.”

Could the former colleague be someone from before Gaoshun became a eunuch? Had he really been a military officer or something?

“A really similar incident? In what way?”

Maomao was honestly more interested the current poisoning story than Gaoshun’s past. She set her previous thought in the back-burner and proceeded with the talk.

“After eating a *fugu namasu*¹, a certain official fell into a coma.”

(A certain official?)

Maomao had a somewhat unpleasant premonition. She thought for this reticent man, just then for a moment, wasn’t he chattering non-stop?

Maomao sneaked a peek at Gaoshun’s face.

His face was like normal, the worldly-wise person with wrinkles on his brows, but it seems that he was also studying Maomao.

“My apologies, Gaoshun-sama. Is the rest something I’m allowed to hear?”

She tried to go straight to the point, but Gaoshun’s expression remained unchanged. Arms in his sleeves, he nodded slowly.

“Yes, there is no problem. Since Shaomao understands your own position.”

He told her something surprising.

And then.

“Moreover, is it fine to cut this conversation at this point?”

“...please continue.”

Maomao said as she frowned at the Gaoshun who seemed to be putting on airs.

Gaoshun continued, pointing at the wooden slips.

“This time, it appeared that the *namasu* was made with scalded *fugu* skin and meat. It said he fell into a coma after eating that.”

“*Fugu* meat? Not the guts?”

“That’s right.”

Fugu poison doesn’t get neutralised with heat. But, the part with lots of poison would be the guts such as the liver, the meat has comparatively less. So, if there was poison that can make someone fall into a coma, she guessed it would be the liver part.

(Did it really accumulate that much poison?)

And yet, cases of having poison according to the variety and raised environment certainly exists.

Given that it wasn’t said as a rule, it might be that sort of case.

What Maomao ate was the section with less poison. Though she occasionally got carried away and ate liver, she wasn’t in considerable danger. She remembered the madam had forced her to drink water until her stomach turned over.

“If that’s the case, are there any other strange points?”

At Maomao’s words, Gaoshun slowly shook his head.

“That is....”

Gaoshun answered while scratching the back of his head.

“The chefs insisted that they didn’t prepare *fugu*. For this incident, and the previous

one too.”

Despite Gaoshun’s frown as if to say what’s the deal with that, Maomao stuck out her tongue.

It was a very interesting story.



There were several similar points between this incident and the previous one.

It said the official who collapsed from this incident, and the merchant from the previous one, were both gourmets who enjoyed delicacies. Though this time the *namasu* even used fish meat that was scalded, it said it was normally eaten raw. Be as it may that it was fresh, there were cases where the raw fish had parasites, normal people don’t really eat it by choice, and it had been banned in some areas.

For this reason, it said these kinds of gourmets often prefer and eat dishes made from *fugu*. Everyone denied it, but among gourmets, there are also those who purposely eat the meat that has small amounts of poison on it and enjoy the tingling sensation.

(To not understand that goodness is...)

She thought that people must be tolerant of other people’s tastes.

It said the chefs of both incidents claimed their innocence by having not used *fugu* in their cooking. However, the proprietors who ate it both got poisoning symptoms. Evidence that *fugu* viscera and skin were discovered among the rubbish in the kitchen had been presented.

(They were surprisingly thorough in their investigation huh)

Maomao was strangely admired that. In these times, there are a lot of worthless officials who make up criminals from fabricated evidence.

Both chefs said that was used yesterday but not for today. In any case if it was midsummer, to leave kitchen waste out for days on end in this season where the days aren’t cool yet, even leaving it out would be ridiculous.

The ingredients for the *namasu* was a different fish. The leftovers of that fish were discovered in the rubbish basket.

(It can't be said surely that the officials fabricated that. Nevertheless, there's no positive proof that the chefs were speaking the truth.)

Unfortunately, there were no people who could be witnesses.

When they eat delicacies, it is said that it is common for officials to eat alone in the room because they would be scolded by their wives. The *namasu* was brought over by the chef, and the ones who see the contents were the employees from a distance, who couldn't know what kind of fish, with it being cut up.

It said that the victim collapsed after he ate everything. In terms of time, it was a quarter-dual-hourhalf an hour after eating.

It said he was discovered convulsing, lips blue like he was suffocating, by an employee who was bringing in tea.

(Even the symptoms are like *fugu* poisoning.)

From this and that, the information alone that Gaoshun brought was insufficient for Maomao. She stopped expressing her thoughts temporarily and decided to ask Gaoshun once more for any information.

(Just what could it be?)

As she was muttering, a handsome face suddenly appeared at her side. Maomao inadvertently froze the nerves on her face.

"Sorry, but that face actually does hurt *me* too."

Jinshi with wet hair said. Suiren said "oh my," as she wiped up his dripping hair.

Maomao return her face back to normal. It probably looked like a face when you uproot a foreign country's screaming root².

"It looked like you were listening to Gaoshun awfully enthusiastically."

Jinshi said somewhat unamusedly.

“If it’s interesting, people will listen to it intently.”

“...hold it there. You, listen to what I’m say—“

His face in a state in of shock, Jinshi was mumbling a little. She couldn’t quite catch what he said at the end.

“It’s getting late, so I’ll be returning now.”

Maomao lowered her head at Suiren, who was busy even though she was drying Jinshi’s hair, and plod out of the room.

Whilst, hoping that Gaoshun will bring even more interesting talk tomorrow.

And then, whether it had a relation to the casualties, she thought that without suppressing her own curiosity like this, while wondering if her dad will get angry at her.

-
1. Raw seafood and vegetables pickled in rice vinegar. A reoccurring dish....
 2. ...Mandrake?

CHAPTER 9

NAMASU (2)

It was a recipe that Gaoshun brought over the next day.

“This is a write down of the chef’s dish. The employees had testified that the outline of the dish that was served to the proprietor is in here. The chef also said that was what they prepared.”

Gaoshun flipped open the notebook and laid it on the table for her to see. It detailed the directions on how to cook the *namasu* that used scalded fish.

Maomao looked over it, stroking her chin.

You combine scalded fish with finely sliced vegetables and dress it with vinegar. It wasn’t a particularly strange dish, though it noted a somewhat peculiar combination in the preparation of the vinegar.

There were several kinds of vinegar combinations noted – it should be for the change in flavours according to the season and obtainable ingredients. The ingredients, types of fish and vegetables were not written in detail.

Hmm, Maomao stroked her chin.

“You won’t know what they essentially used with this.”

“That would be the case.”

Maomao was looking over it, her head tilted, when an unamused Jinshi came in from her side. He had some longan¹ meat in hands, and were splitting and eating it. There were some black, dry thing inside it.

Longan is a small lychee-like fruit that is harvested in summer. The dehydrated version is called Keienniku², and is used in herbal medicine.

“Do you not know?”

Looking like he was itching to do something, he propped his elbows on the table and stared into Maomao's face. Gaoshun looked at him with furrowed brows, but the warning itself wasn't good enough.

(You have to hammer it home.)

Maomao was giving the misbehaving Jinshi an icy look, when a hand stretched out, gently taking the longans from Jinshi's hands.

"Misbehaving children don't get snacks."

Fufufu, Suiren stood behind Jinshi with a bright smile. What is it, this atmosphere. Maomao couldn't tear her eyes away from the dark clouds that hung over that woman's back.

"I get it."

Jinshi lowered his brows³, lifted his elbows. And when he corrected his posture, his old housekeeper nodded, "Good," as she returned the longan back into Jinshi's hand.

I thought the old housekeeper⁴ just spoiled him, but it turns out there is a strict side for proper etiquette to her huh, Maomao thought.

The discussions had deviated somewhat, but they went back on track.

"The incident occurred really recently, right?"

"It was about a week ago."

In terms of seasons, it was still cold yet. It is typical to use cucumber in *namasu*, but they would probably use other root vegetables for this season.

"The ingredients would be something like daikon or carrot, right?"

Vegetables that can be used in winter are limited. Ingredients had seasonal times – the seasons to eat them are also limited.

"They said they used seaweed for that."

At Gaoshun's words, "Ah," Maomao's mouth gapped open.

"Seaweed?"

Maomao asked again.

"Seaweed."

Gaoshun repeated.

Seaweed is used both as food and as traditional medicine.
It was probably also used as the ingredients for *namasu*.

Having heard those words, Maomao inadvertently nodded.

(If you say that they prefer delicacies.)

They probably got their hands on some more or less unusual seaweed.

The sides of her lips shifted into a broad grin. Her double tooth was probably peeking out from her parted lips.

At that, Jinshi and the others looked at her in bewilderment.

Squinting in delight, she looked to Gaoshun.

"If that's okay with you, is it possible to let me see the inside of the kitchen of that house?"

Maomao said to Gaoshun, having nothing to lose.



Gaoshun's arrangement was swift, the plan was that Maomao will enter the kitchen of the aforementioned chef tomorrow. It seems that she could easily enter, with the officials who handled the incident already done looking through it. Normally it was like that, the one who was called Gaoshun's acquaintance should have looked around over-attentively.

The estate was situated in the north west of the city. All surrounding houses that lined up were altogether magnificent. The north-side of the city with the imperial court that was mainly resided by high ranked bureaucrats would be something like this.

Since the lady of the estate was asleep, fatigued and having lost weight, it was a manservant who let them in instead. They already got permission from the lady so it shouldn't be a problem.

(A manservant huh.)

Finding that strange, Maomao headed for that place.

Her companion was an official that was arranged by Gaoshun. He had been staring at Maomao doubtfully this whole time. Though he didn't seem to have come willingly, he looked like the type to follow Gaoshun's order, so there weren't any issues at present. He was probably a military officer. His body, still young, wasn't perfectly built, but he moved sleekly with his whole body. *He looks like someone*, she suddenly thought.

Maomao assumed that he didn't really think to get along with her, so she thought that was fine.

Luckily, as poison had been used to make food, the kitchen hasn't been used since that incident.

It was when Maomao plod into the kitchen.

"What the hell are you doing!"

A man dashed towards Maomao, his eyes raised. Wearing high class clothes, a man in his thirties.

"Don't just enter the kitchen, get the f*ck out! You! You dare bring in this kind of guys!"

The man grabbed the collar of the manservant who had guided them in.

Maomao was looking with narrowed eyes, and her accompanying official took a step forward.

“We properly got the lady’s approval. Besides, this is our job.”

Maomao sent a round of applause to the official who replied coolly to the violent man.

“Is that true?”

The man loosened his grip on the collar.

As he coughed and spluttered, the manservant verified their claims.

“Can we come in? Or are there any inconvenience?”

At the official’s words, though the man had clicked his tongue, “Suit yourself,” he spat out.



It seems that the lady of the official who had fallen into a coma was forced to bed. The estate was now managed by that official’s younger brother. It seems to be the man from before.

Maomao surveyed the inside of the kitchen.

The cookware, as expected, seemed to have been cleaned and put away nicely by the chef, but aside from easily spoiled perishables like fish, the ingredients had been left as it is.

Maomao searched out the inside of the kitchen.

And the thing she was looking for was easily found in the shelves.

When she saw the small bottle of salt pickles, Maomao smiled smugly.

“What is this?”

Maomao asked the pale looking manservant. The manservant squinted his eyes at the inside of the container. His face said he had no idea, so she took a handful and put it in a water jug for him to see.

“How about this?”

“Ahh. That’s what the master likes to eat.”

The manservant told her that there’s no way that would be poison since he always ate it. The lady seemed to have faith in him, she didn’t think he would be lying.

“And that’s how it is. Quickly leave.”

The man said, desperately annoyed. He kept an eye on the bottle in Maomao’s hands.

“I suppose so.”

Maomao returned the bottle to the original place. A handful, she hid inside her sleeves.

“I’m sorry to have troubled you.”

Maomao, saying that, left the kitchen. Still, the gaze piercing at her back didn’t disappear for a while.



“Why did you withdraw so easily?”

The young military officer asked Maomao in the horse carriage on the way back.

“I don’t think I withdrew.”

She took out the salt covered seaweed from her sleeves, and wrapped it in a hand-towel. Her sleeves that were covered in salt were gross, but the military officer could get angry if she brushed it off here in front of him.

“This is strange. It’s still a little too early to harvest this seaweed, but still, even if it is pickled in salt, it is not the something you can get until in this season.”

It was quite an out of season ingredient.

“That’s why I thought it wasn’t something harvested from around here. For example, it could be like something that was procured from the south through trade.”

The military officer’s eyes widened at Maomao’s words. It seems like he understood

what he should do – he won't need a detailed explanation.

What happens after was only something that Maomao could do.



The next day, the kitchen that she got permission to use from Gaoshun was prepared for her. It was the office of an official who was in the imperial court, seems like he* could stay over at night.

Maomao prepared the thing she arranged last night in this room.

Although she called it prepared, it wasn't something significant. She was only serving something that was put in water to remove the salt.

It was a simple work, but being the circumstance, she thought she didn't have to use the kitchen in Jinshi's building, and was prepared another one.

And now, there were two dishes were in front of Maomao. They were the seaweed she sneaked off with yesterday washed in water and portioned into two. It was a vivid green.

Standing in front of Maomao was the official who consulted Gaoshun about the incident, the military officer who guided Maomao yesterday, and for some reason, Jinshi. *Suiren will be angry again for misbehaving if you're here because of curiosity*, Maomao thought.

"When I investigated, it was as you said."

The young military officer said casually.

The seaweed from yesterday was brought in by a merchant from the south.

"After that, I asked the manservant again. He said that, now that I mentioned it, that seaweed wasn't eaten in winter. I also asked the other employees and they generally gave the same answer."

Amid that, the one shaking his head was the official who had consulted about the incident.

"I already heard from the chef about this seaweed. As it was the same variety of seaweed that is usually used, I was told it shouldn't be poisonous."

Maomao endorsed that. It was the same variety of seaweed.
But if there was a point that was different.

“That doesn’t mean that it is not poisonous.”

Maomao said as she picked up the seaweed from the dish with chopsticks.

“Perhaps, there isn’t really a custom to eat this seaweed in the south, what about that? From what the employees of this time’s gourmet said, what if a merchant thought they could make money off that and specially got the locals to make salt pickle?

“How does that become an issue?”

The one who asked was Jinshi. Maybe it was for the people here today, the strangely exhausting atmosphere she saw recently wasn’t there. Gaoshun aside, the two officials close by were looking at the beautiful eunuch somewhat uncomfortably.

Maomao said as she playfully fiddled with her chopsticks.

“There are times where poison can become non-poisonous.”

The means to do that were varied. Eel blood is naturally poisonous, but if the blood is drained and heated, the eel can be eaten. In this case, Maomao was sure she recalled that lime⁵ was required.

And, in the two dishes that Maomao portioned, one had used lime and the other didn’t. The one she was picked up with her chopsticks was what she pickled in the lime she prepared last night.

Maomao popped it in her mouth. Everyone fell into a fluster, drawing closer as to ask what she was doing.

“It’s fine. Probably.”

Actually, this was only something she heard as knowledge. It happened that she didn’t really know if just pickling over one night will be enough to neutralise the poison. This too was an important experiment.

“What do you mean by *probably*!”

“Be at ease. I have vomit inducing medicine right here.”

She took out from her bosom the medicine she had decocted with bravado.

“Don’t it say it so confidently!”

In the end, she was held down by Gaoshun from the back and forcibly made to eat the vomit inducing medicine by Jinshi. Thanks to that, she vomited noisily in front of the four gentlemen.

They must be wondering what they were doing to the unmarried girl.

By the way, the vomit inducing medicine made you vomit from its disgusting taste. So, it was extremely disgusting.

After having recovered her senses, Maomao said.

“This would be the problem, but who was it who suggested to the traders to bring in salt pickled seaweed?”

Specially ordering it from an area where they don’t eat it, what a way to do things.

“The person who fell into a coma was just paying for his own’s mistakes.”

But, if that was wrong.

And if it happens that they knew about the possibility of it becoming poison.

(This is just a guess to the end.)

The possibility of getting struck with a clue from the incident from ten years ago certainly exists.

The people here were clever. She didn’t need to say anymore, and had no intention of doing so. Maomao was a small human⁶. She did not want to deeply consider going along with whoever’s sins.

“I understand.”

Gaoshun, looking like he understood what Maomao wanted to say, nodded slowly.

Maomao let out a sigh of relief, and picked up the seaweed that was before her and ate it. This time it was from the other dish.

And, once again, she ended up being forced by the pale-faced Jinshi and the others to vomit it back up again.

-
1. Also known as Dragon Eye. A cherry-sized tropical fruit that grows in clusters from trees. It has a relatively hard thin yellow-brown shell and the meat is white and very juicy. It has a dark brown seed, as mentioned below, though the part that is connected to the fruit is a lighter shade. Super sweet and tasty.
 2. 桂円肉, Keien meat. 桂円 is just another name for Longan. I suppose it tastes a little like osmanthus (桂) and has a circular (円) shape?
 3. Not too sure, but it might have a similar meaning to knitting his brows? Out of displeasure?
 4. Btw the word for old housekeeper also means wet nurse, and I think it means both in this case. Suiren is both his housekeeper and former wet nurse.
 5. Calcium hydroxide.
 6. Someone with low social status. An insignificant person.

CHAPTER 10

RAKAN

“Don’t eat poison as you please.”

Jinshi laid down the order at Maomao as soon as they returned to his room.

(How cruel.)

The poisonous seaweed dish was also confiscated. Maomao gawked at him.

The two dishes Maomao prepared this time were also for her to properly check if there was poison by putting her own body at risk. Even though this was an important experiment. However, to her bad timing, the destination of the seaweed was bought to light, and the one who purchased it was known.

It was the younger brother of the bedridden official.

Even though it was discovered who the buyer was, the person himself admitted it simply.

She thought the staring when she was entering the kitchen had been certainly strange, so it seemed to be the case.

You would have that sort of attitude if you have something you want to hide.

It was a common story. If the eldest son is healthy, the second son will be ignored. Maomao and the others were disappointed by the simple reason, as far as it had been amusing.

Leaving that aside.

Aside from being told not to eat poison, he’s considerably tolerant, Maomao reassessed.

When she thought hard enough – turning a blind eye to Jinshi’s perverted actions – his treatment of her was quite good.

(Even so, I do as I like.)

Towards Jinshi, she replied to him discourteously, did not show him respect, gave him attitude, viewed him like creeping bug.

If she was the master, she would immediate fire that sort of court lady. Or rather, she'll hang her. Don't want hanging, let's request for poisoning.

(If it comes to that, the medicinal herbs,)

Pay was inconsequential. She had other ways to earn money.

However, on imported medicinal herbs and the like, there was one item she can't get her hands on for a pharmacist in the prostitution quarter

Even though she bore with it for many years, there were many things she wanted for poison experiments.

She must work with whole-hearted devotion from here on. She plastered on the smile she was trained from her prostitution training and looked towards Jinshi.

Since Jinshi was making a dazed face, she was thinking she made a mistake with the expression she plastered on, when he suddenly bashed his head against the pillar. He was slamming his head like a woodpecker.

At that sound, Gaoshun and Suiren, the middle-aged court lady, rushed in.

She had absolutely no idea, but she ended up being stared down by Gaoshun.

(It's not my fault this time.)

The weird one is your master, Maomao thought as she sulked.



Maomao's daily job ends with her receiving her master, Jinshi. Therefore, it was a easier for Maomao when Jinshi comes back quickly.

Jinshi entered the room, looking worn out.

"Welcome back."

This is where you say "Master", Suiren said, but Maomao ignored that. No matter the

circumstance, her tongue might cramp and she could end up biting it if she said that.

Recently, Jinshi had been returning late from work. The reason seems to be due to him putting the piled-up work into order.

If you went to the point of accumulating work, you would have been better off not spectating the incident from the other day and focus on finishing your work quickly, Maomao thought, but he mentioned that it was on a matter that was really hard to do.

“Whether the horses don’t suit ¹ or whatever it is, our opinions really don’t match.”

Jinshi sighed as he accepted cider from Suiren. The person in this case was someone who had resistance towards Jinshi, but lost his mind from just seeing a court lady from somewhere. What a troublesome eunuch.

If such a person finds someone with an opinion, he conversely is terrific, but at the same time, you also think you don’t want to get along with him.

“I too have people I have trouble dealing with.”

He seems to be high ranking military official, someone who is famous for being sharp, but a weirdo.

It was said that when he finds fault one way or another, he brings guests into his room, otherwise he assaults them, and engages them in Shogi² – putting off the judgement of the subject they were chatting about.

His target this time was Jinshi.

As a result, it was said he stays in his office for a dual-hour and does overtime like that.

Maomao looked a little irked.

“What kind of retirement is that?”

“He’s only passed his forties. He’s nasty, exactly because my job is ended*.”

(Past his forties, a high ranking military officer, weirdo?)

They were keywords she had memory of from somewhere, but she couldn’t remember it and it didn’t seem to be a good thing so Maomao decided to forget about it.

Well, even if she forgets about it, her usual unpleasant premonition was fixed.



“We already talked about the matter.”

Jinshi gave a celestial maiden’s smile at the uninvited guest. It required effort to get it from stiffening.

“No no, it is hard to see flowers in winter. If that was the case, I thought about coming here.”

An aloof middle-aged man, unshaven faced, wearing a monocle, was there. He was clad in military officer robes, but his appearance was quite fittingly a civil official’s. His thin fox-like eyes were teeming with intellect and madness.

The man’s name was Rakan, a tactician. If you go with the times, he would be called Taikoubou³, but in this society, he was just a weirdo.

His pedigree was good, but he wasn’t married even though he was past his forties. He entrusted the management of the family to a nephew he adopted as a son.

Speaking about Rakan’s interest, it was rumoured to be Go⁴ and Shogi. He will force them into it even when his opponent is not interested.

Speaking of the reason why he charged at Jinshi recently, it was because he got a maidservant who was a girl with a connection to the *Rokushoukan*.

It wasn’t false, but it was indecent where getting a girl from a brothel is concerned. Above all, since the person in question was making a face like he could hear the sound of bugs flying in the air in midsummer, he expected it to be resolved as peacefully if at all possible.

The form of the maidservant, how people took that, was the issue.

And despite this, this personage, who liked gossip like a youthful girl, was instilled with half-truths. The military had assumed that Jinshi had redeemed her. No, it was hard to say that they got it wrong.

As the words from the old man who was energetic about something flowed in from one ear and out the other, Jinshi stamped the documents that Gaoshun brought in.

“That saying, a long time ago in the *Rokushoukan*, I had a close friend.”

What an unexpected thing to talk about, Jinshi thought.

He was totally not interested in things like love affairs though.

“What kind of prostitute was she?”

Jinshi, his interest unconsciously piqued, ended up asking in return.

Rakan smiled smugly. He poured the fruit juice he brought into a glass. The appearance of him reclined on the couch was as if it was no different to him relaxing in his own room.

“She was a good prostitutewoman. Brilliant at Go and Shogi, Though I won at Shogi, I always lost at Go.”

To win against a tactician, she must have been strong, Jinshi thought.

“To be unable to meet with a woman who was interesting to that extent, I had thought of redeeming her as well, but the world was not on my side. Just as when two fanciful rich people competed for her, her value was raised.”

“My goodness.”

A prostitute’s redeeming money sometimes become a sum that can build one villa. It was probably the case that even Rakan couldn’t pay up.

With that kind of talk, what was this man trying to say?

“She was an eccentric prostitute, selling her art but not her body. On the contrary, she didn’t think customers as customers. Even pouring tea, rather than attending the master, she looked at you with eyes like she was giving charity to a peasant. Well, I am only just one person who says it that way, but that thrill down your spine was irresistible.”

“....”

Jinshi, feeling uncomfortable, averted his eyes. Gaoshun, standing in wait, was biting his lips into a straight line.

In this world, there is quite a person with the same taste.

Whether he knew the inside of that heart or not, Rakan continued.

“I thought I would one day try pinning her down.”

In the eyes of the grinning man were a glimpse of flames that were imbued with madness.

“In the end, I didn’t give up on that prostitute either, I couldn’t help but played a little dirty. Well, if I can’t pay up if the price was high, it shouldn’t be a problem if I make it cheaper.”

I lowered the premium.

“Do you want to know how I did it?”

The fox-like eyes were smiling over the rims of his monocle.

He had won over the opponent before they had noticed. That was why he was terrifying.

“Did you come all the way here to put on airs?”

“Oh dear, it’s already time. My subordinate gets angry when I stay over for too long.”

Like he was turning over his palm, Rakan packed up the fruit juice. He put another sake bottle he prepared on Jinshi’s desk.

“Please give this to the court ladies connected to your room. It’s not too sweet so it’ll be easy to drink.”

As the middle-aged military officer waved,

“Well then, see you tomorrow.”

He left.

1. Tastes and way of thinking is different, hard to get along.
2. Japanese Chess.
3. 太公望, Hopeful Grand Duke, a schemer, the title of a tactician from Zhou Dynasty China. That tactician's name was Jiang Ziya, a Chinese noble who helped the kings of Zhou overthrow the Shang dynasty.
4. A strategy board game where you try to surround your opponent to take their pieces.

CHAPTER 11

VALUE

Last night, Maomao had a weird dream.

It was a dream from long ago, no, it was a dream from something a long time ago.

She didn't expect to remember it, an incident that she wasn't sure if it was true either.

An adult woman was looking down at Maomao from above. Messy hair and gaunt cheeks, she was glaring at her with starved glittering eyes. Her make-up had come off, the rouge was jutting out from her lips.

The woman stretched out her hand, grabbing onto Maomao's left hand. It was a small, small hand like birch, where dimples could be seen.

The woman was grasping a blade with her right hand. The left hand that was holding onto Maomao's hands was wrapped in several layers of red soaked cloth. The cloth that fluttered about stunk a bit like rust.

A sound that sounded like a cat's mew leaked out from her vocal cords, she understood it to be her own crying voice.

As her left hands was pushed into the futon, the woman raised her large right hand overhead. Her twisted lips were trembling, her eyes swollen red welled up with tears.

(A stupid woman.)

Just like that, the woman swung the small blade downwards.



"Oh dear, are you sleepy? You'll have to wait a little for slumber time."

Suiren said to the yawning Maomao.

She had said it politely, but since this old housekeeper was quite strict, Maomao fixed her attitude and steadily polished the silverware.

“Not at all.”

It was only because she had a slightly weird dream. She didn’t get enough sleep, the drowsiness had rushed in when night fell.

Why was that?

(It’s because of that discussion yesterday.)

The personnel Jinshi mentioned yesterday, that must have stuck to Maomao’s memories.

(It’s unpleasant. Forget it.)

There’s no way it could be that person, Maomao took in a deep breath.

She stacked the plates with a clatter, and when she turned to the shelves, she heard shuffling footsteps. The beeswax in the room were lit. It was time the master returned.

Recently, Jinshi, his face worn out, passed right through the living room, going as far as into the kitchen. Suiren served up a side dish on a plate that Maomao had wiped up nicely.

“A souvenir from a weirdo. Drink it with Suiren.”

Jinshi placed the sake bottle on the table.

When Maomao pulled the stopper, she smelt the bittersweet scent of oranges. It must be fruit juice.

“From a weirdo?” Maomao replied in a measured tone.

Jinshi reclined on the couch when he entered the living room. Maomao added coal to the brazier.

Gaoshun left the room when he saw the declining stock of coal. Was he going out to

get some? As expected of the diligent man.

Jinshi looked at Maomao as he scratched his head brusquely.

“You know much about things like close friends at the *Rokushoukan*?”

To be suddenly given such a question, Maomao tilted her head.

“If you’re talking about a person who conducts himself flashily.”

“What kind of guy is there?”

“That’s confidential.”

Jinshi knit his brows at the curt answer.

It seems he noticed that he made a mistake with the way he asked the question. He rephrased it.

“Then, how does one lower a prostitute’s value?”

“You’re asking something unpleasant.”

Maomao sighed lightly.

“There are many ways. Especially for higher ranked prostitutes.”

Becoming a top-class prostitute, the number of jobs are few even in a month. The popular ones don’t constantly take up guests. Rather, the ones who must take up guests everyday are those called streetwalkers who toil for coins for the day.

High class prostitutes don’t prefer exposure. By holding back exposure, all their guests arbitrarily raise their value.

Poetry and dance, studying music – they attend their guest with such culture.

At the *Rokushoukan*, the training takes up the entire period of being a *kamuro*. During that, those whose looks were not bad, the ones who have good prospects, are divided between those who are not.

The latter immediately attend guests as soon their debut ends. Selling not art but their body.

Those with good prospects start off with tea drinking. More than those who excel in the art of catching patrons with their talk, it is those who excel in wit and intelligence who steadily rise in value. And accordingly, as the popular prostitutes purposely reduce their exposure, they become popular prostitutes who exhaust one year's of silver with just tea drinking.

That said, there were also prostitutes who don't work even once with a guest until their redeeming. Well, something like a man's romance, they think that they want the one who first plucks the flower would be themselves.

"They have value because they are untouched flowers."

Maomao burnt incense that had a calming effect. She lit it for Jinshi who had been worn out recently.

"If the flower is plucked, from just that alone their value is halved. Moreover,"

Maomao breathed in lightly, inhaling the calming scent.

"If they fall pregnant, their value becomes next to none."

She expected herself to have said it unemotionally.



What is this about, Jinshi let out a deep breath as he stamped the documents.

"Excuse me."

With the sound of the door being knocked, a personage who grinned like a fox appeared just as he had said yesterday.

A subordinate courteously brought in a couch with small cushions.

Just how long was he planning to stay here?

"Shall we continue where we left off yesterday?"

Rakan poured himself some orange juice from the sake bottle he bought along.

He even brought in tea cakes. Baked sweets with smell of butter were set on the desk

that was littered with documents. *I want you to stop putting it directly on top*, Gaoshun who saw the oil stains on the documents clutched his head.

“You seemed to have truly done quite a wily thing.” Jinshi said as he stamped the documents.

He couldn’t get the contents of the documents into his head, but since Gaoshun who was waiting at the back wasn’t saying anything, he figured there was no problem.

From Maomao’s reply, he could imagine what this sly madman did.
And so, another unwelcome guess came to his mind.
It wasn’t he couldn’t understand. It was consistent. Several points matched.

Why, he charged in from the talk of redeeming at the *Rokushoukan*.
Why, he talked about his old friendship.

However, he didn’t want to recognise that.

“Apologies for the wiliness. It was a story where I didn’t want to mention the black kite¹.”

The eye behind his monocle squinting in delight, Rakan laughed.

“Even though I finally persuaded the madam. It had taken more than a decade. You can see it as the body was snatched away from the side.”

Rakan tilted the cup with a clink. There were shards of ice floating in the fruit juice.

“You mean to return the fried tofu?”

The ‘fried tofu’ that Jinshi was referring to was the unsociable short girl.

“Well yeah, I’ll pay you as much as you want. I don’t want to tread on the same path I did a long time ago.”

“And if I say no?”

“If it turns out that way, I won’t say anything. Those who oppose *Milord*² will disappear as they were snapped by a finger.”

Rakan was speaking in a roundabout way. Jinshi was extremely ill at ease.

His words made quite some sense.

Rakan removed his monocle and wiped it with a cloth. After checking that it wasn't smudged, he put it back on his left eye. Since he was wearing in his right eye until just then, it was understood that it was just for show. He really was a weirdo.

"I just wonder what my *daughter* thinks about this."

Rakan emphasised the word 'daughter'.

Ah, no way, so it was something like that.

Rakan was Maomao's real father.

Jinshi's stamping came to a complete stop.

"Can you tell her that I am going see her sooner or later?"

Rakan licked his buttery fingers, and left the office.

Seeing as he left the couch there, this should mean that he will come again.

Jinshi and Gaoshun wasn't signalling each other, but they hung their heads in sync and let out a huge sigh.



"There's an official who wants to meet you this time."

As soon he returned to his room, Jinshi, who was reluctantly meaning to tell her, said to Maomao honestly.

"What kind of person?"

Maomao seemed to be hiding something she was fidgety about in the depths of her indifference, but her tone was calm like the usual.

“Ah, he’s called Rakan....”

Without Jinshi finishing his words, Maomao’s expression changed.

Until now, she looked at him like she was looking at a bug, like a dried earthworm, like filthy mud, like trash, like a slug, like a dead frog, – tentatively, they were all looks of scorn – but he realised that this was from apathy.

It was impossible to describe.

If Jinshi was faced with this, he surely can’t live.

It was like it smashed the core of the heart into dust, poured into bubbling iron, until ashes aren’t even left.

That was the expression Maomao was making.

“...I’ll do whatever it takes to decline him.”

“Thank you very much.”

Jinshi, while dazed, could only say that.

It was a miracle his heart didn’t stop.

Maomao returned to her former unsociable expression, and went back to her own work.

-
1. This guy is mentioning part of a Japanese proverb, the rest is referenced below in the convo – *To have one’s fried tofu snatched away by a black kite*. To be robbed of one’s due. The important thing you expect to obtain is abruptly carried off from the side, and you’re left dumbfounded.
 2. He’s actually referring to Jinshi with a very, very polite ‘you’. And of course, polite forms don’t really exist in English so I made do with this.

CHAPTER 12

GAOSHUN

After his bath, Jinshi was slowly drinking from his wine cup.

When he had thought he heard the embers popping, the outside was already covered in snow. It should be getting cold.

As he put on the outer garment that was draped over the couch, he heard a clacking sound.

The sound came from the entrance, a design of this building. With that sound, you can pretty much determine who was coming in.

It was as he expected. His attendant, whose wrinkled brows cannot return to how it was before, came in.

“I sent her back with no problems.”

“Sorry as usual.”

Gaoshun was entrusted to send Maomao back when it got late. It was what he occasionally did before, but he now thought that as that weirdo could find her, it cannot be overlooked. Because of that, as if he read Jinshi’s expression, Gaoshun kept silent and handled the job.

He was the man who had overseen his education since Jinshi was weaned. For a period of time, they had been separated when he had another job, but he was one person who understood Jinshi the most.

“It’s the inner palace tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

After escorting Maomao back, Gaoshun had headed to the medical office to pick up a certain thing that was compounded for him. It was a strange bitter liquid. *Just looking at it makes me feel nauseous*, he thought every time.

The medicine was portioned into two silver bowls, and Gaoshun took the first taste. Originally, it was thought it was a job that Maomao will take the initiative to try, but it was meaningless for her. Gaoshun downed it all, his brows furrowed deeply, and then waited a while.

“There’s no problem. It’s the usual.”

“Gotcha.”

Jinshi picked up the bowl. He pinched his nose and drank it down in a single gulp. He wiped the liquid that was left on the side of his mouth with the back of his hand and accepted the water Suiren bought to him.

He had already drunk this continuously for five years, but he still couldn’t get used to it.

“Pinching your nose. It would be better if you don’t do that in front of others.”

“I get it.”

“You look very young from just that action.”

“I get it.”

Jinshi, as he sulked, sat on the couch.

His tone of voice, speech, walk, activity, all kinds. He had to pay attention to all those things.

The eunuch called Jinshi was a twenty-four-year-old man.

He straightened his posture, tried to adopt the eunuch Jinshi’s face.

But the bitterness of the drug lingered and his face ended up slackening. Gaoshun frowned again.

“You don’t have to drink it if you don’t like it.”

“Isn’t it a distinction just in case*.”



Five years, has he been in the current emperor's Inner Palace. Five years, has Jinshi continued to wear that warped mask.

Like so, he had continued to drink the medicine that takes away his masculinity.

Despite what the emperor had imparted him. *Do whatever you like to low-ranked consorts and under.*

"You'll eventually truly become impotent."

At Gaoshun's words, Jinshi spat out the cider he was drinking to remove the bad taste in his mouth. He held his mouth, looked at Gaoshun resentfully.

Occasionally, I'll have to tell you this much, Gaoshun looked as if to say that.

"Not like you're any different."

"No, my grandchild was born last month."

Gaoshun's children were already adults. It appeared that he wanted to say that he didn't need to make any now.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-seven to count¹."

If he remembered correctly, he heard that Gaoshun married at sixteen and that three kids consecutively from the following year.

"No, I'm talking about your son. He *was* there that time."

It was the time of the seaweed food poisoning incident the other day. The young man who accompanied Maomao that time to the official's house, that should be Gaoshun's youngest child.

"He should be, eighteen. The same age as *milord*."

Gaoshun not using the name 'Jinshi', that was a point. 'Jinshi' is twenty four years old,

a man who became a eunuch five years ago.

“That guy’s kid?”

“No, my eldest daughter’s. He should be getting around to marriageable age soon though.”

Gaoshun’s children were all doing well. The married daughter had also been working as a maid at the imperial court about one year ago.

He was looking like he somehow wanted to say something to Jinshi. Jinshi, with an innocent look, recrossed his legs.

“Please let me hold your grandchild soon.”

“I’ll try.”

Gaoshun drank the warm tea that Suiren presented to him.

Jinshi ignored the reproachful attendant’s fleeting look, and gulped down the cider.



Jinshi’s regular visits to the four consort’s places ended smoothly today as well.

The newly entered Consort Rouran seemed to be living in the Inner palace with no signs in particular of being unaccustomed.

As she was a consort who entered through brute force in a sense, he had been worried that some riot might occur, but both Consort Gyokuyou and Consort Rifa didn’t have the character to rush right into things. The two had previous difficulties, but that was a special case. Since then, they had built a relationship where they don’t strike or touch each other.

As for Consort Riishu, she wasn’t the type to start fights. He didn’t know if the maids will pester the consort though, so that was something to be cautious about.

However, when he entered the new consort’s palace, once the palace Consort Ah Duo had lived in, he felt lonely all over again.

The palace that was once plainly organised, minimalist, had changed to be an

extravagant place surrounded by gorgeous fixtures.

Consort Rouran's father was the person the previous emperor, no, more correctly, the person the previous empress dowager had been pleased with. He was the official who once increased the number of inner palace court ladies to as far as three thousand people.

The one who presently stands the highest in terms of favour and trust was Consort Gyokuyou, with Consort Rifa coming in next. It doesn't mean that when one gets to the position of the emperor, he can go to his favourite consort's place.

If there's the capability to preserve the power balance of the imperial court in the inner palace, there is also the capability to destroy it.

He cannot treat Consort Rouran imprudently. It seems he make sure to see her once every ten days.

If it becomes the case, the ones trembling with trepidation would be the other consorts. Although he goes to their places more, it was about whether a child could be made when it can, and when it can't be made when it can't.

Nevertheless, there was something called compatibility. He heard that the emperor doesn't move his forefinger to Consort Rouran not very much.

I can't say I don't know the reason, Jinshi thought when he looked at Consort Rouran.

At the enigmatic lesson due to Maomao, Consort Rouran was wearing a kanzashi with the feathers of a bird from the southern countries, and a strange outfit.

Maomao had looked at that outfit strangely, but she can't say she didn't understand.

Consort Rouran had once worn the outfit of the southern countries, and had once worn the robes of a foreign northern tribe. He once thought she was wearing barbarian robes like a boy, but tied up at her hips was a dress from the west. Her hair and make-up changed every time too.

In a sense, she was a fashionista, in a sense, she has no composure. Her face was neat by nature, but her looks didn't stand out. It was from that reaction that he heard as a rumour it became like this, but how would that turn out?

It said every time the emperor visited, the consorts are thrown into disorder of not knowing who it will be. And so, it said she really can't get into it.

Even Jinshi felt the same way. However, among the court ladies, there seems to be those who see Consort Rouran's new trend, and tilt their heads in incomprehensibility.

The emperor's policy was that he would not touch them until they were sixteen. In another year, Consort Riishu will be secure. The current emperor might be against it to the point of feeling nauseous because of his father, the previous emperor's taste.

The empress dowager has a large scar on her abdomen. That was due to the time when she was still a young girl, when she gave birth to the current emperor with her small body. It was due to the surgical operation called a caesarean that was used that even abandoned the mother's body to give birth to the child.

That was under the orders of the emperor's grandmother who was the empress dowager of that time. That woman, at the same time, was called the Empress. She is called that even now. She wielded that much authority. No one could defy her.

And it was said that it was a last resort, because no matter how much the inner palace expanded and the number of court ladies increased, no child had been born.

Of course, since the previous emperor only touched young girls whose periods haven't come yet, there's no way they could give birth. It seems that the Empress didn't know that was the reason.

There was no other way to say that the reason the present empress dowager kept her life was by good fortune. By chance, there was a medical officer who returned from studying abroad in the west; by chance, it said that that man became a eunuch. It felt like a scheme even though it was said it was by chance – it was so circulated. Because it was as the Empress says.

That man's treatment was splendid. Although it left a scar, the womb was left intact that in ten-odd years the empress dowager gave birth to another child. The previous emperor's children were the after and before, just those two.

Just that, maybe due to the previous childbirth, that medical officer came to constantly attend the empress dowager who was also a consort at the same time. The crown prince's consort whose birthing had overlapped with theirs at the same time was disregarded, and consequently, an unfortunate thing happened.

Jinshi cannot help thinking. *What if the current emperor's first child was alive right now.*

He shook his head. He mustn't have absurd delusions.

And so, he thought like so. *You should just hurry up and make one. The next crown prince.*

Jinshi and Gaoshun share the same sentiments.

After the usual consort training, the emperor's footsteps have increased considerably, but though he had thought that the results of that would come way later, it might have come unexpectantly fast.

Honnyan, Consort Gyokuyou's head maid, had spoken out about that in concern.

It seems the emperor had visited the Jade Palace yesterday as well; Consort Gyokuyou looked lethargic. Honnyan, in concern, was being too helpful. Her pitch-black hair was in disarray. It seems that Gaoshun was sometimes sympathetic to the head maid who look like she has a lot of troubles with something. Honnyan didn't seem to be as annoyed at Gaoshun, but since she was the partner of the hen-pecked husband, Gaoshun, she'll eventually have no choice but to give up.

Just at the right moment, Jinshi set forth a certain proposal.

Consort Gyokuyou, her eyes shining, immediately replied with a nod.

Honnyan made a face that said *oh my*, but it was a rather welcoming expression. She had a talk with the three maids who were listening in from outside the room.

He didn't seem to have made the wrong choice.



"The inner palace, is it?"

"That's right. Your favourite job."

Maomao polished up the silver tableware until it shone like a mirror.

After she confirmed that there was not even a smudge, she put them back onto the shelves.

It was impolite to talk during work so she quickly put everything to order. She wanted to keep that much distinction.

Jinshi was eating mandarin oranges. He could've just peeled the skin himself, but Suiren was peeling them one by one for him and neatly setting them on a plate for him.

He really is a young master.

It seems the middle-aged court lady tends to spoil this eunuch. She dresses him in padded garments when it's cold, cools down his tea when it's hot.

How embarrassing for a grown adult.

"It appears that Consort Gyokuyou's period has stopped."

(There is the possibility of her being pregnant huh.)

When she was pregnant with Princess Rinrii, the consort had two poisoning attempts. She must be restless in heart.

"From when do I to go?"

"You can even go starting from today."

"How very convenient."

The inside of the Inner Palace was forbidden to males. It must be to deter that person even whose name she didn't want to hear from meeting her.

Jinshi might have anticipated that for her, or it might just be convenience.

Maomao was fine either way.

She had planned to move as composed as possible but,

"Oh my, did something good happen?"

Since Suiren had asked that of her, it appeared that she was standing on the balls of her feet.

It looks like she was going to work at the Inner Palace again for a little while.

1. This is the traditional East Asian age system; western age is one year younger. So by western standards, he's 36 years old.
- 2.

CHAPTER 13

INNER PALACE AGAIN

(I thought I wouldn't fit in before.)

Apparently not, surprisingly, Maomao thought.

She enjoyed the lifestyle of the inner palace after a long time.

Thought it might have been that she was brought up in a place full of women that she could easily adapt to this sort of atmosphere.

Just like before, she spent every day tasting food, compounding and talking strolls.

Consort Gyokuyou's pregnancy still wasn't determined.

It was the same when she was pregnant with Princess Rinrii. Apparently, she didn't have terrible morning sickness and her sense of taste didn't change much. Aside from her irregular menstruation, there wasn't much positive proof.

Nevertheless, as a worse case counter-plan, a gag order was imposed at the Jade Palace.

This is clearly the apt time for people who would be inconvenienced by Consort Gyokuyou's pregnancy to target her. They wouldn't resist even serving her poison.

The emperor – the lusty old man – decided to refrain from nightly intimacy for caution's sake.

There's no problems if they carried it out normally, but if Consort Gyokuyou put the consort training into practice, deviating from the normal category, well, you can't deny the possibility of several problems occurring.

(Should I have taught something a little gentler?)

No, but then Consort Gyokuyou and the emperor wouldn't be satisfied. Subsequently, Consort Riishu was frightened off, and Maomao was treated more like a monster by Consort Rifa's maids.

As it was hard for her to speak of this sort of matter to the emperor herself, she got

Jinshi to relay it to him. It was reserving to say it directly from the mouth of a maidservant.

She didn't want to number of visits to Consort Gyokuyou to decrease if possible, but she couldn't suggest that much. The emperor didn't have only one consort. There will be people who would be suspicious if the amount of sleeping suddenly decreased though.

Surprisingly yet, the times the emperor visited didn't decrease. He played with his cute daughter and took pleasure in silly conversations with Consort Gyokuyou. She had thought with Consort Ah Duo's case too, but it might be that they didn't try lay down their feelings with the lusty old man.

Otherwise, it could be that the emperor was thinking like an emperor. The current emperor was said to be a wise emperor. Of course, it could be precisely because the previous emperor was said to be a foolish emperor that he was perceived this way, but Maomao didn't think he would be as far as a foolish emperor.

(I'm fine with either way though.)

The point was that she was glad to be provided a livelihood where the earning tax wasn't too high. A foolish emperor believes his people to be infinite, a wise emperor knows that his people are finite. At the very least, this emperor is the latter.

It was just that he makes a slightly lonely expression from time to time, so she decided to pass over the materials she had left from the consort training. *It could act as a time waster.*

She had bought over several volumes in preparation, but unfortunately, there were no maids who wanted it.

It goes without saying what kind of teaching materials they were.

(Bear with 2D for me.)

Though secretively she left it in a place within his eye-shot, it seems he noticed.

When she was ordered to prepare something different in a later date, she was convinced that the lusty old man really was fine the way he is.



At the inner palace, gossips are spreading, believed to be caused by the repetitive monotonous days that had a chronic shortage of the opposite gender as usual.

And it was so, the maids, who are currently taking a rest from work, are chatting in the kitchen. The tea cakes they had today that were leftovers from the tea party was dragon beard candy. It was a candy that was shaped like a cocoon made of fine threads; when you put in your mouth you will be moved to the point of tears. It had a slightly sweet aroma; it seemed to be mixed with tea leaves.

“And that’s why it’s impossible. That outfit.”

It was Infa, one of the maids of the Jade Palace, who was mumbling with her mouth crammed with candy. This strong-willed girl spoke whatever came to mind.

“You have a point. But the outfit from that time might be good. Aren’t barbarian robes cool?”

Speaking with a gentle tone was Guien. Her plump cheeks were eased with happiness from tasting the candy.

“That kind of robes depends on the person who wears it. It’s not that she didn’t suit it.”

Airan was the one with the tall and slender figure. She was just sipping tea, not picking up the sweet things.

Infa looked as though she was betrayed by her two friends, and eyed Maomao who was left.

What a pain. While Maomao thought that, she nodded, “Yes, okay.” However, her sociability ended here.

Infa, who had anticipated reinforcements, puffed out her cheeks.

“Mmm, for that sort of thing, Consort Ah Dou was cooler.”

Infa sipped her tea as she sulked.

Seeing that appearance, Guien and Airan exchanged glances and grinned.

“Oh my, Infa. Were you actually in Ah Duo-sama’s faction?”

“T-that’s not true!”

Infa got flustered at Guien’s words. Airen instantly flashed an evil grin.

“No need to hide it. Our master may be Gyokuyou-sama, but I think that sort of feeling is good to have.”

“Like I said, that’s not true–”

Listening to the three girls who were chatting up a storm as usual, Maomao drank up her tea with a sigh. The cotton candy was slightly on the sweet side for Maomao who was fond of alcohol. *I feel like some salty rice crackers to get rid of the bad taste*, she thought.

The subject of what Infa and the others were talking about was this. The Consort Rouran who had newly entered. As this consort was slightly eccentric, there seemed to be a lot to talk about her.

As for what, it was her outfits.

The atmosphere of her outfits changes completely with every little thing. There was one time where she wore a western dress, and there was another time where she was clad in an outfit that looked like the horseman of a foreign tribe.

(What can I say about that?)

Perhaps she was rolling in money. Just to change outfits every time, the palace will become just a wardrobe.

Because of that, the Pomegranate Palace that was once pure bearing was already replaced to the point of having no traces of it left. It was a force that tried to wipe away Ah Duo who once lived there.

In a sense, true, in a sense, wrong.

The inner palace was a world that stands out in the crowd. At the same time, it is also a world that hammers down the nails that stick out. Originally, Consort Rouran was supposed to be hammered in, but as her father was a senior statesman who stood high

in favour and trust since the era of the previous emperor, the present situation was that there wasn't a hammer to nail her down.

(I see how it is huh)

With that being the case, there was more than enough reason to drive Ah Duo out. Rather, it might have been better to wait if you take Consort Rouran's age into consideration.

Maomao suddenly thought.

Honestly, even for the emperor, wouldn't it be more convenient for him in various ways to allow Ah Dou to stay in the inner palace?

Since she won't become the empress dowager, her eyes can anticipate directly ahead. Her wisdom was as if she was a court official.

The reassuring Ah Duo has gone even as an advisor, and having a girl who is likely to influence not just the inner palace but even the imperial court enter court in exchange – even if she is a heavenly person – would be a talk of concern.

He cannot flat out refuse her. And it would also be troubling if they become over affectionate and make a child nevertheless. The time a consort's backing shield is reliable is only in the unreliable era of the crown prince. She could become useless as soon as he becomes emperor and a child is made after all.

Well well, what would be done?

As that sort of wild idea came to mind, Maomao poured herself some tea from a small teapot.

CHAPTER 14

BLUE ROSE (1)

And just like this, half a month passed by in a blink of an eye.

The coldness has also subsided. The time when the buddings of Spring is felt. While drying the futons, Maomao felt like she was losing against the allure of the pleasant sunlight. *Bad, bad*, she shook her head and devoted herself to work.

The days really do pass by quickly when you're productive every day. She felt the two months she spent at Jinshi's building was needlessly long.

She had regrets for the medicine shelves in the medical office she was allowed to use sometimes, but that shouldn't be an issue hereafter if the medical office that the quack doctor used got remodelled.

As for the archives, if she asked Gaoshun, he'll bring over something of her choice for her.

Now if she could go out of the inner palace anytime, it would be so much better, but that was a talk of luxury. As long as she is in the inner palace, she cannot go out readily.

Consort Gyokuyou's pregnancy was beyond certain.

Her period stopped, she continues to be lethargic. Her body temperature seems to be slightly high and the amount of defecation seems to have increased as well.

For some reason, Princess Rinrii smiled when she saw Consort Gyokuyou's abdomen. Perhaps she noticed that there was something there.

(Does she know?)

She waved her hands in good bye at Consort Gyokuyou's abdomen and moved to the nap room with Honnyan.

Children are mysterious.



The princess who is now tottering about wears the red shoes bestowed by the emperor and has come to take up the maids' time. She had become more expressive, smiling sweetly in return when she raises her soft steamed buns. Maybe it was women's instinct, the maids of the Jade Palace brought up the princess affectionately despite having no children.

Occasionally, Honnyan would say something like, "It should be about time for me too," but Maomao and the other maids had no idea how to react to that. Though she looked impatient, the head maid who had a strong sense of responsibility couldn't be planning to retire for marriage. Although, even if she brings in that kind of marriage proposal, everyone would force Honnyan to stay.

It's because there was her that the Jade Palace had only this many people. It is also troubling to be overly capable.

Maomao became the princess' companion when she didn't have anything much to do. Rather than the other hard working maids, it was more efficient to have someone who doesn't work well enough aside from food tasting to look after her instead.

Maomao was playing with Princess Rinri today as well. The princess was playing by knocking down assembled building blocks. The blocks were purposely made from light timber.

As she seemed to be interested in books with pictures, Maomao copied down the pictures from a book she borrowed from Gaoshun and wrote their names under it. The princess was still two years of age, though Maomao tried it out since she heard that you remember faster what you're familiarised with, but Honnyan confiscated it.

"Draw normal flowers."

She was told and was pointed to the flowers in the garden.

It turns out that poisonous mushrooms were a no-go just because they are pretty.

She spent every day doing things like that.

It was at that time the eunuch who was beautiful in looks appeared after a long while with a troublesome present in hand.



“Blue roses?”

Maomao said, looking at the eunuch who appeared slightly worn-out.

“Yeah, everyone was interested in it.”

Jinshi nodded with a troubled face. The court ladies raise their voices at that sort of expression, saying that a sorrowful face was also beautiful. Also, let's not mind the three pairs of eyes that were currently peeking in from the gap of the door. There was Honnyan with reverse triangle eyes who were skilfully pulling the ears of two people with her right hand and another with her left, don't mind that either.

Let's keep silent about Gaoshun who was admiring that with, “What a clear way of doing things.”

Returning to the conversation.

“They had come to admire that flower this time.”

He said he was tasked with finding that for some reason.

(Yet another bothersome thing.)

“And you've come to find me.”

“You know anything?”

“I am a pharmacist.”

“I thought you might be able to do something.”

Jinshi said something deplorable.

“That's the very thing.”

Consort Gyokuyou who was sitting comfortably on the couch also followed his lead. The princess was slowly sipping her fruit juice beside her.

She didn't know who in the world it was, but it seemed that someone said that if it's Consort Gyokuyou's maids, they would know something. So that's how it is. That's why Jinshi came around with a flower pot.

(Could it have been the quack doctor?)

It wasn't out of the question.

That good natured old man tends to overestimate others. This was the most troublesome thing.

She couldn't say that she knows absolutely nothing about roses. The prostitutes had ordered for skin-beautifying oil derived from flower petals. It was boiled down and distilled from the petals of strong smelling wild roses; she made it before to earn some pocket money.

"Apparently it bloomed in the imperial court a long time ago."

Jinshi said, crossing his arms.

From the entrance of the room, Honnyan who was done with scolding the three girls entered with newly prepared tea.

"Couldn't that be a delusion?"

(Ahh, my shin is itchy.)

I wonder if there are bugs in this season, Maomao thought.

Maomao scratched her skin with her toes, taking advantage of the table to hide her feet.

"One person suggested it, but when I asked, I got quite a number of testifiers."

Jinshi said with an indescribable expression.

"Was opium prevalent?"

"The country will fall if that sh*t circulates!"

Her speech unintentionally changed, Consort Gyokuyou and Honnyan exchanged glances with bulging eyes. Gaoshun furrowed his brow and cleared his throat.

Jinshi looked offended momentarily, but he gave a celestial maiden's smile at the next instance. He looked at Maomao with appealing gloominess.
As expected, Maomao was bad at dealing with this sparkly face.

Oh my, Consort Gyokuyou watched with amusement. It was not amusing from this side.

"Is it unreasonable?"

(Don't lean closer.)

It's depressing if he comes any closer.
She gave a sigh.

"What do you want me to do?"

"They want it for the garden party next month."

The Spring Garden Party.
Did they already request it from the previous garden party?

When Maomao was lost in her deep feelings, she realised something.

(Mm? Next month?)

"Jinshi-sama, did you know?"

Maomao said while scratching her other leg this time. She must make some insect repellent since she can't make it after the princess's skin has insect bites.

"About what?"

Jinshi tilted his head.

As expected, he didn't know.

Blue roses don't exist, but this was a problem before commenting about colour.

"Roses bloom at least two months later."

“ ... ”

His silence was telling of what he didn't know.

(I knew it.)

She had a bad feeling for some reason.

It seems he was pressed down with an unreasonable demand to put him on the spot.

“I'll go decline it somehow.”

“Can I ask one thing?”

Jinshi, whose shoulders were slumped, looked towards her.

“Could this be something a certain tactician proposed?”

Considering the flow of things, it might be something like this.

(I thought it was no wonder I was itchy from way before.)

She presumed it was that sort of atmosphere somehow or other. It seems Maomao's body displayed a strong reaction against the man whose name she didn't want to hear.

“Yeah. Raka....”

Jinshi held his mouth in a fluster.

Consort Gyokuyou and Honnyan tilted their head in perplexity.

Needless to say, it was about that *man*.

(Can't be helped.)

If that was the case, it was also her responsibility.

“I don't know if I can do it, but I'll do what I can.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. For that, there are several things and a place I’ll need.”

It was irritating to just run away.

Might as well, she now wanted to smash that smirking monocle.

CHAPTER 15

BLUE ROSE (2)

The Spring Garden Party was held within the Spring peonies.

It was held a little earlier for the year, but it became like this for the continued appearance of those who couldn't bear with the coldness each time. Changing custom so it could be earlier was difficult.

In the park, a red carpet was laid out and long tables and chairs were set up. The orchestra, as they waited eagerly, were tending to their instruments.

Harried court ladies checked if everything was perfect in preparation. Young military officers watched in enjoyment as they stroked their still sparse beards. At the back where the curtains were drawn, someone was making a racket.

A short maid who was gaunt from weight loss was carrying a large vase. Multicoloured roses, that were slightly early in season, were arranged there.

"You truly made it?"

Jinshi gazed at the flower buds that have yet to open. Colours red, yellow, white, pink, blue, and far from it, even black, purple and green was arranged there. She said she would make blue roses, but who would have thought that they could become this gorgeous?

How is this even possible? Jinshi blinked rapidly.

"As expected, it was hard. They haven't bloomed."

Maomao said regrettably from the bottom of her heart.

Rather than a response to Jinshi, she said it out of disappointment that she couldn't do what she had thought. Jinshi understood that the girl had that kind of personality. He understood but it was somewhat irritating.

It really was irritating.

"Nah, it's good enough."

Jinshi picked up a stalk of rose. A drop of water slid down from the stem.

“Hm?”

Jinshi had a somewhat uncomfortable feeling but returned the rose to the vase. *It doesn't matter what happens now.*

At any rate, even though she said blue roses, this was arranged rather lively.

Jinshi left the girl who looked like she was going to collapse from overwork to the maids of the Jade Palace and went to adorn the seat of honour with the vase. The flowers that were still budding seemed to be good enough to steal the attention away from the gorgeous peony flowers.

Everyone surrounding him at a distance was astonished.

The high officials who had scoffed, saying that is impossible, raised an uproar.

Jinshi was a eunuch who stood high in the emperor's favour. Though this appearance had hardship even when he says it himself, he understood that it takes the breath away from most people. Even so, it wasn't that he had no enemies.

It wasn't just officials who are so free of aspirations they like to butt in on the stripling of a eunuch.

Jinshi, maintaining his celestial maiden's smile, straightened his back as he smiled bewitchingly, and headed towards the platform. He was aiming for the seat where the emperor with the beautiful beard was surrounded by his beautiful consorts.

The looks that were gathered onto Jinshi hid all sorts of expectation. Lust was still okay, he had many uses for that. Jealousy, that too was okay, it was easy to handle. No matter what emotions there are, he had many ways to deal with it if he understood that they were thinking.

The most troubling was-

Jinshi looked at the official who was waiting to the left of the emperor. Plump cheeks, eyes whose thoughts couldn't be discerned.

You could say that this was what he was bad at dealing with.

This man ought to recognise him as a mere stripling eunuch.

A motionless stare that seemed to be staring into the abyss.

That incomprehensible vague smile.

This was Shishou, the father of Rouran, a consort who was currently in the inner palace. He had gained the favour of the previous emperor, no, that person's mother, the empress. Even now, the emperor still can't stand on equal ground with him.

In a bad way.

Jinshi didn't erase his smile nevertheless....

He couldn't have erased it.

Shishou's gaze shifted over to the left, that is, he met the eyes of the man who was sitting to the right of the emperor.

The fox-eyed man with the monocle was chewing on a chicken wing, not reading the atmosphere of the occasion. Nonetheless, as if the person in question was planning to hide it, he hid his nibbling inside his sleeves and hid his chewing again.

Currently, the most troublesome person was this guy, Rakan.

It was fine if it was just that, but Rakan was staring at the head of the high official who was standing next to him, and, whatever was he thinking, gently plucked off their coronet.

For some reason, a clump of black hair came along under the coronet. Rakan looked dramatically surprised. About three high officials facing opposite them who could see the bald top of the official's head lost it.

He did such a cruel thing.

Even though it was a nicely made wig.

At that childish action, there were those who smiled wryly, those who were shocked,

those who were trying their utmost not to burst into laughter.

It wasn't just Jinshi whose expression cracked.

However, Jinshi couldn't afford to burst into laughter there. He somehow endured when he felt his expression was cracking and knelt on the red carpet.

He held up the multicoloured roses towards the emperor, who nodded in satisfaction while stroking his beard.

Jinshi stepped down from the back, holding back a big sigh.

Rakan, while dramatically peeking into the rose vase, picked up raisins this time.

Why does this guy can't help being rude? Jinshi couldn't help thinking.



"You mustn't go to the Crystal Palace again."

A fair distance away from the banquet, Infa was letting Maomao rest on her lap.

Infa had stayed with Maomao the entire time out of concern.

Consort Gyokuyou who was almost sure of her pregnancy postponed this time's banquet. Officially, she handed over her seat for the Pure Consort, for Consort Rouran's debut.

There was a reason as to why Maomao got so skinny to the point of worrying Infa.

Apparently, Maomao can't help getting over-worked when she goes to Crystal Palace.



For a little over this month, Maomao visited the Crystal Palace again.

She paid no heed to the maids of the Crystal Palace who were, as usual, treating her like they were looking at a monster.

Nevertheless, Maomao needed to come here to make the blue roses. The arrangement

was handled by Jinshi whom she asked for his consent.

The place left when Jinshi had requested for beforehand, the sauna of the Crystal Palace.

It was something constructed at top speed for Maomao previously to cure Consort Rifa.

Consort Rifa, as usual, was a noble lady, but it said she immediately gave her permission. Since she knew that there was a place that was splendidly generous, she checked it out.

Maomao thought it was bad to use it as it is,

“This is the emperor’s favourite book.”

She said, and handed over the book she newly ordered from the brothel the other day. It was because the emperor had asked for something different.

When Consort Rifa realised its contents, she returned to her room, her steps graceful.

Maomao, with an icy gaze, remembered the maids who were speaking furtively as they saw off that person’s back.

As if anyone would believe that she would bribe a noble lady with sort of thing.

Even though she acquired the owner of the building’s humour, she constructed a hut in the garden for the steam from the steam bathroom to flow in. A strange structure with large windows that were even in the ceiling. It used money like water, but since Jinshi paid it out of his own pocket, she paid no mind. At any rate, just how high was his salary?

Rose pots were transported there. It wasn’t just one or two. Several tens, no, over hundreds were brought in.

Within the air that was warmed up by steam, she cultivated roses. She took them out as much as possible on clear days so they could get sunlight.

On days cold like frost was still falling, she put water on heated stones and kept the hut continuously warm throughout the night.

To speak of what Maomao was doing, she wanted to throw the roses off-kilter. Flowers bloom together with the season, but occasionally for some reason, they would bloom

off-season.

In short, Maomao wanted to encourage off-season flowering.

And so, she prepared a large quantity, not considering that all the pots had flower buds. Even the variety of flowers, she selected those that would bloom as early as possible and made sure the varieties were scattered.

The period short to a little over a month, she didn't have proof of achievement, but how glad was she when she saw the flowers budding?

Above all, more than adding colour to flowers, getting the flowers to bud was much more difficult.

Jinshi had sent in several eunuchs for her, but delicate things like temperature regulation were up to Maomao to perform. All the roses could be killed off with a mistake, and it'll be curtains then.

Sometimes, the maids of the Crystal Palace would loiter around, whether it be out of plain curiosity or morbid curiosity. Because it was disheartening, she made sure to look towards other things.

While thinking as to what to do, she was struck with an idea when she looked at her fingers.

She painted rouge on her nails and rubbed it carefully with a cloth.

Manicures were common at the prostitution quarter, but it wasn't seen much at the inner palace. It would get in the way of work, but the maids who normally didn't do much work in the first place got into it with great interest.

She purposely gave them a quick look of her hands, and the maids went to their rooms to look for their own rouge.

(This is convenient.)

Thinking something slightly bad, she also recommended it to Consort Rifa.

There are trends in the inner palace. And the trend leaders are usually the consorts who received favour.

Even maidservants too, if they become the emperor's mistress, they could be

summoned as a consort. In that case, it wouldn't be strange for people to copy the woman that the emperor was interested in.

Currently, it would be probably Consort Rouran who would be chosen as the most fashionable in the inner palace, but there's no way that she could become the starter of a trend with her changing that much frequently.

When she returned to the Jade Palace for food tasting, she showed Consort Gyokuyou and the maids the manicure. Though Honnyan said it was inefficient, everyone else was very interested in it.

(If only there are rose-balsam¹ and wood-sorrel².)

Rose Balsam, which was also called Nail Red³, and Wood-sorrel, which was also called Catfeet⁴, are crushed and mixed together and painted on nails. Wood-sorrel accentuated the red colouring of Rose Balsam.

When manicures were the trend for the court ladies of the inner palace, the buddings of the roses swelled out, and every one of them revealed white flower petals.

All the roses that Maomao chose were white.



"Just what was that?"

Jinshi said when he came back after the roses were debuted. His brows were furrowed. Gaoshun, who was waiting at the back, was also looking with great interest.

As Jinshi's group told Infa that it was already fine, she went back. Officially, Maomao was Consort Gyokuyou's attendant maid but she was still employed by Jinshi.

"I just dyed it."

"Dyed? No such thing. There's nothing on the petals."

Jinshi said, feeling the petals with his fingers.

"It's not on the outside. I dyed it from the inside."

Maomao pulled out one stalk of rose.

And put her fingers on the cut end. There was blue liquid on the stem of the blue rose.

White roses left in coloured water.

That was all it was.

The colouring in the water was absorbed through the stem, dying the white petals.

That was why any colour was not an issue since the roses would absorb the water.

Just that, because the colour of the leaves become stained dark, when the flowers are arranged in the vase, all the flowers aside from the white ones are picked out.

The roses look like they were all arranged in the same vase, but each of their stems were wrapped in cotton soaked in colour and fixed by oiled paper. There weren't taken off until they were just about to be presented.

It was quite a simplistic matter.

The method being the method, there might be those guys who would come with accusations on something or other. To deal with that, she disclosed the secret of the trick to the emperor who visited the Jade Palace last night. It seems that anyone would be happy to be the first one to be taught the secret, they would listen to the explanation in high spirits no matter what they say.

It appears that Jinshi withdrew before hearing the emperor's talk.

"In other words, the blue roses that were seen before was because there was a leisurely person who got the roses to soak up blue water day after day."

Maomao said while looking in the direction of the rose garden.

"Why is it that sort of thing again?"

"Who knows. Perhaps they could have wanted a means to woo women?"

Maomao said coldly, taking out a long and narrow paulownia box from her bosom. It looked like the caterpillar grass box but its contents were different. It was something she took the opportunity to fetch when the treasured book was brought over.

“How unusual.”

Jinshi peered in.

“Are you going to paint your nails?”

“Yes. It doesn’t suit me though.”

On her hands that were rough from medicines, poisons, and washing, the nail on her left pinkie was strangely crooked. Even if she painted it red, the crookedness wouldn’t change.

Such as it is, it was on the side where it became more decent.

Since he was staring with interest, she ended up facing him again with the usual eyes like she was looking at fish that was floating on the surface of the water.

(Bad, bad.)

Maomao shook her head. If she minded this much, she’ll be worn out for what happens after.

She still had work left to do.

“Gaoshun-sama. About the thing I requested from you.”

“Yes, I did it is as you said.”

“Thank you very much.”

He set the stage for her.

The rest was just to scare the hell out of that nasty guy.

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1. 鳳仙花, Housen-flower. *Impatiens balsamina*, a flower historically used to make orange-ey coloured nail polish. Means “Don’t touch me” in the language of flowers.
 2. 片喰, Katabami. *Oxalis corniculata*. Yellow flowers. This variety is actually called Creeping Woodsorrel, or sleeping beauty. Means “Shining Heart” in the language of flowers. A natural remedy with anti-inflammatory, detoxifying and paregoric properties.

3. tsumabeni

4. nekoashi

CHAPTER 16

MANICURE

Like irony, the multicoloured roses amassed the attention of the banquet.

Rakan beheld at it in a daze. Affected by the excessively sleepy music, he had picked up someone's coronet unaware and a clump of hair had come along with it.

Oh dear, Rakan thought, leaving it on the next table.

When he did so, the official next to him hastily put it on.

Rakan wasn't sure, but he somehow had a feeling that he was being stared at. For now, he took off his monocle, wiped the surface with a cloth and wore it on a different eye this time.

The roses were placed in the middle of the banquet.

The look of it, like it was showing off, was as if it was showing the detestable personality of the arranger.

He remembered that he once had a banquet.

A wavering shawl of thin silk. The flowing reverberation of strings.

Being treated to a simple lavish meal before tea, enveloped by the smell of alcohol.

Meaningless things from long ago are truly unmemorable.

He remembered being there, but the emotions from that time were completely out of reach.

The banquet was over by the time he came around. The two consorts clad in black and blue outfits were each being bestowed roses that signified their colours from the emperor.

He wasn't sure, but from all the voices around him, they were beauties.

Things like the facial beauty didn't matter to him at all.

At any rate, it was boring.

Did she not come?

He didn't know for what reason he provoked her.

Since there's no helping it, let's go poke fun at a different person. Let's go look for revenge.

He looked around. There were still a lot of people left.

He was bad with crowds.

He could only see most people as go stones.

He could distinguish between genders, but he saw men as black stones and women as white stones. Moreover, he could only see them as *indistinguishable generic faces*.

Even people from the military he was acquainted with could only change to shogi pieces at most.

Most of them ordinary soldiers were pawns, and as they rise in rank they become spear or knight.

The job of a tactician was simple; it was better to deploy them in correspondence to their piece. Most battles are won with the right person in the right place.

It wasn't difficult, but Rakan's job will be over if he did only just that. Even if he assigned it incompetently, his surroundings will arbitrarily end his job for him.

There you go, Rakan thought.

Although everyone admired the man that had a celestial maiden's smile, he himself didn't understand.

The gold general that was followed by the promoted silver – he would have no problem if he looked for just that.

He was used to looking for people like that.

Nevertheless, his eyes hurt more than usual today.

The red caught his eyes. Everyone had rouge on their fingers.

Was the thing called manicure the current trend of the court ladies?

The nails that he recalled in his memories wasn't such a gaudy red.

It was a lightly dyed red.

It was the red of rose balsam.

When the nostalgic name of the prostitute suddenly came to mind, a short court lady was projected before his eyes.

Small and thin, but determined, a daughter that was like wood-sorrel.

Hollow eyes faced this way.

When he became aware of his own staring, she turned to her back as if to say come along.

On the opposite side of the peony garden, a shogi board was laid out in a small gazebo. There was a paulownia box on top of the board. Inside was a withered rose that was laid down like a corpse.

“Will you be my opponent?”

Picking up the shogi pieces, his daughter asked in monotone.
The gold general and the promoted silver was standing close by.

He shouldn't have any reason to decline.
If it is his cute daughter's request.

Rakan displayed a wide grin.



Just what did she want to do?

Jinshi was here, ignoring Maomao's words to go back if he could. Maomao seemed deeply reluctant but relented on the terms of him saying absolutely nothing at all.

Having invited the tactician, Maomao lined up the shogi pieces.
Her face was completely blank of emotions – her normal unsociability still had the touch of humanity. Sometimes she looked like she was scratching the back of her hand, but would she even be bitten by a bug?

“First move, second move, which one is it going to be?”

It is clear that he was utterly delighted from the thin eyes inside Rakan's monocle. Because he was that tenacious, wasn't that a given?

"Before that, shall we decide the rules and price of the bet?"

Maomao proposed.

"That will save me some time."

Jinshi peered at the board from behind Maomao.

Rakan faced him an ominous smile, but there was no way she would lose. He returned him a graceful smile.

A best-of-five match with no irregularities. In other words, you win when you win three games.

Jinshi couldn't understand. The tactician never lost in shogi. For starters, the game chosen was a mistake.

What was Maomao thinking?

Gaoshun seemed to share the same sentiments; the furrows on his brows were even deeper.

"I wonder what pieces you need. Rook or bishop?"

Rakan said.

"I don't need anything."

Maomao didn't accept the long-awaited proposal either. *You should've just accepted it meekly*, Jinshi thought.

"Well then, if I win, you'll be my child."

Jinshi was going to voice his objection to that proposal but he was stopped by Gaoshun from the back. He had promised to say nothing at all.

“Since I’m in the middle of employment, it’ll be after the end of the term of service.”

“Employment?”

The fox-like eyes stared this way.

Jinshi, smiling, had to keep his cheeks from stiffening.

“Are you really employed?”

Rakan said to make sure.

“Yes. It was recorded in the document that way.”

It was like that. It was written like so in the document that *Maomao* saw.

But it happened that the one who signed it was the madam who substituted for the guardian. She had snatched away the brush from the man that was like Maomao’s father.

“That’s fine then. Leaving that aside, what about you?”

Looking doubtful, Rakan said.

“I don’t need anything. However, is it alright if I change two things after the rules?”

“I don’t have a problem with that.”

“In that case.”

Maomao took out the wine bottle she got Gaoshun to prepare beforehand.

She poured equally into five cups. It seemed to be strong distilled liquor from the scent.

Next, she unwrapped the medicine she took out from her bosom and added in the powder with a rustle. She added what seemed to be different powders into three cups. Maomao swirled the cups, mixing that, and quickly shifted the five cups around. It is no longer clear which one is which.

“Every time you lose a game, you drink what the opponent chooses. It doesn’t matter whether you sip it or however you wish.”

He had an extremely unpleasant premonition. Why was that?
Jinshi went around the sides from behind Maomao
It seems like her expressionless face was slightly flushed. Her cheeks were eased like she was having fun.

You can take for granted what it means when she makes that face.

What in the world were the powders you added just then? He wanted to ask but he couldn't.
He was irritated at himself for that.

"What were the powders you added just then?"

Rakan asked for Jinshi.

"It's medicine. On its own."

If all three are put together, it becomes a deadly poison.

The odd girl simply said it with a smile.
And then.

"If you forfeit the game for any reason whatsoever, you lose. These two rules, please. "

Maomao said that as she swirled the cups with medicine in it.

The pinky on her left hand that was painted red was crooked.

Rakan eyed at that finger.



Jinshi could only think of heartless things.
Though it wasn't a problem if you don't drink three cups, it still wasn't something you would simply want to put in your mouth.

Was it to shake up the opponent?
Certainly, a normal opponent would be shaken from that.

But the opponent was the tactician who was called a weirdo. He didn't think that that guy's mind would be thrown into disarray from a mere shaking up.

As expected, Maomao lost two times in a row.

Contrary to expectations, she had some knowledge, but it seems like as far as knowing the rules, she had lacked actual experience.

She had already finished off two cups of alcohol. And yet, she drunk it as if it was delicious.

Just what in the world was she thinking, he thought.

The third match had only just begun, and yet the end could be seen.

He thought of the possibility of getting poisoned by drinking the third cup.

The likelihood of choosing a poisoned cup at the start was five to three, the next would be four to two, and the last would be three to one.

In short, with the possibility of ten to one, Maomao would ingest deadly poison.

Honestly speaking, thinking that if it's Maomao, she would have no problems even getting poisoned, was scary.

He didn't know if Rakan knew that much though.

Well, while thinking about what happens after losing to the bet, when he exchanged glances with Gaoshun,

"Checkmate."

He heard a voice.

It wasn't Rakan's, it was Maomao's.

He exchanged glances with Gaoshun, looked at the board, and the gold general was hunted by a promoted pawn.

It was by such a terribly shoddy piece, but the gold general was certainly blocked off.

"I'm beat."

Raising both hands, Rakan was brought to his knees.

“Even if it’s mercy, a victory is a victory.”

Maomao said to make sure.

“Yeah, there’s no way my daughter will ever offer me poison.”

Maomao, who had drunk two cups just then, did not change her expression. There was no knowing of whether there was poison or not in what she had drunk.

Rakan gave a joking smile and regarded his expressionless daughter.

“Do the medicines have a taste to it?”

“You’ll know with a sip. They are all bitter.”

“I get it now. Pick one for me?”

“Help yourself to whichever.”

So that’s how it is, Rakan was planning to lose after two rounds. And he would know that Maomao wouldn’t be harmed if even one was bitter. The likelihood won’t change, but this was certain.

He really has a cunning man.

Rakan picked up the cup in the middle and drank it.

“It’s bitter.”

Jinshi hung his head.

With this, Maomao wouldn’t win the next match.

When Jinshi was thinking about what to do with the next match—.

“Also, it’s hot.”

He raised his head from Rakan’s words. The man’s face was completely red. His head

was bobbing from side to side.

And then, his complexion went down gradually, collapsing limply the moment he turned pale.

Gaoshun ran up to Rakan to wake him up.

“What the hell was that? Didn’t you say that those were medicines that would be fine on its own?”

To really serve up poison no matter hateful it was? Jinshi asked as though he was interrogating her.

“No, it’s a medicine.”

Maomao said like she was utterly annoyed. She picked up a nearby pitcher and approached Gaoshun and Rakan.

After confirming that Rakan wasn’t in a dead sleep after forcing his eyes open, she shoved the pitcher into his mouth and poured in the water. Quite a violent way of doing things.

“Jinshi-sama.”

Gaoshun looked on with a bewildered face.

“He seems to be drunk.”

“It’s the chief of all medicines¹ after all.”

Maomao’s nursing was so unbothered she only checked to see if he finally come to. It seems she ended up doing it solely because it was her job as a doctor.

“Can’t hold his liquor, this man.”

He finally understood Maomao’s intent with that one statement.

1. Alcohol lol

CHAPTER 17

ROSE BALSAM AND WOOD SORREL

Old memories resurface.

In the middle of the scene that had a countless number of black and white, only there was it dyed in pale red. Within his field of vision, much fuzzier than other people, only there was it shining brilliantly.

Holding onto go stones, holding onto shogi pieces, the red nails on those fingers gleamed.

Her specialty, her movements so sure, so efficient, everyone would raise both hands in surrender. That was the haughty woman who gazed at him impassively, the prostitute called Fenshen.

He had headed to the brothel to socialise, but he was honestly fine with anything. He didn't drink, didn't get the appeal of erhu or dance. No matter how prettily they dressed up, he could only see white painted go stones.

He had been like that since a long time ago.

He couldn't tell apart people's faces. But that became preferable.

To say nothing of getting his mother and nursing mother wrong, he couldn't tell apart men or women either.

His father said that he was worthless like this, so he went to his young mistress.

His mother didn't care about a child who couldn't distinguish her own face and schemed to bring back her husband who had run away with a lover through any means possible.

Due to that, though he was the eldest child of a distinguished family by birth, it was fortunate that he was able to live uninhibited.

He got completely absorbed into go and shogi that he learned from his studies, inclined his ear towards gossip, and sometimes carried out petty pranks.

Even the blue rose that was bloomed in the imperial court, he tried to make it from

hearing his uncle.

Only his uncle, who was excellent but clumsy, understood him.

He was told to remember people not by their face, but their voice and bearing, their physiques. He could easily get it by adapting shogi pieces to familiar people. Eventually, people he had no interest in became go stones, and people who eventually became close to him were shogi pieces – like faces he could see.

When he saw his uncle as the promoted rook, he was reaffirmed that he really was a superior man.

When he heard that such an uncle went to study abroad in the West, he didn't understand how much lonely he would be. Just that, there are now fewer people around him who could understand him.

He never thought he could manifest his own talent in the go and shogi he spent a prolonged time playing.

Owing to his parentage, even though he had no military talent, him suddenly defeating the chief was good fortune. Even if he was weak, if he didn't squander his subordinates, the money will come. There is no mistaking that when people became pieces for shogi, it is the most interesting game.

As he continued his non-losing streak in game or in work, he was recommended by his spiteful associates and was arranged to have a showdown with a prostitute from the rumours. The Fenshen who never lost from the brothel, and the him who never lost from the military.

No matter who loses. It would be interesting to the spectators.

After all, he was a frog in the well.

As if she was cutting away the him who thought in such a way, Fenshen won against him. She may be holding onto a white stone, she may be starting second, the difference between her formation was overwhelming. Those elegantly manicured fingers, magnificent, crushed her opponent's pride.

How long has it been since he lost? More than chagrin, he even remembered the refreshingness of that merciless wound. Was he being made light of? He couldn't

stomach that. She said not one word, he got that from her cold bearing.

Then he found himself doubled over, laughing. Everyone fell into an uproar at the strangeness of it.

Tears in his eyes, when he looked at the face of the merciless prostitute, he saw not the usual white go stone, but the mien of a sullen woman. Like her name, like the rose balsam, like she would burst open if she was touched, she looked at him with eyes that would keep people away.

Did people make that kind of face?

That was the moment he first recognised something obvious.

Fenshen whispered into the ear of the *kamuro* who was waiting beside her. The little girl briskly returned with a shogi board.

Not letting him hear the voice of the first face he saw, the haughty prostitute wordlessly proposed the next match.

He won't lose the next match.

Lifting his sleeves, he lined the pieces on the board.



Just earnestly playing go and shogi over and over again, how many years did they continue their trysts?

However, the frequency of that gradually decreased.

Talented prostitutes restrict their sales to become popular to some extent. Fenshen was one of those too.

Although she wasn't suited to all tastes with her formidable interaction despite being intelligent, it seems she catered to a type of strange tastes. She was completely for people with strange taste.

Her price was also lifted, he scarcely met her once every three months.

When he went to the brothel after a long time, her face unsociable as usual, she was painting her nails.

A red rose balsam flower and a small grass was on the tray.

When he asked what that was, she answered “Catfeet.” Apparently, it was also used in herbal medicine and was effective for detoxification and insect bites.

Amusingly, just like rose balsam, apparently, it actually shoots off seeds when you actually touch it when it’s ripened.

As he was going to try touch it this time, picking up the yellow flowers to look,

“When’s the next time you’ll come?”

Fenshen asked.

How unusual. She was a woman who only sent standard promotional letters but.

“In another three months.”

“I understand.”

Fenshen got her *kamuro* to put away the nail polish, and began lining up the shogi pieces.



It was the time he heard about Fenshen’s redeeming talk.

Over than having no complaints on the prostitute’s value, it was just that he couldn’t stomach that the people competing for her had raised her price.

Although he was promoted as a military officer, he whose position as heir was snatched away by his half-brother didn’t have the money to contend.

What do?

Suddenly, a terrible idea sprang into his mind, but he immediately extinguished it. It was something he mustn’t do.



Three months later at the brothel, Fenshen was sitting with two boards, go and shogi, lined up before her.

The very first thing she said.

“Shall we make a bet for a change?”

If you win, I'll award you what you like.

If I win, I'll receive what I like.

“Please choose the board you like.”

He had a better chance of success for shogi.
But he sat before the go board.

Fonshen, saying she wanted to concentrate on the match, got the little girls to retire.



Afterwards, while not knowing who was winning, when he realised, their hands had overlapped.

There were no tender words, nothing from Fenshen. He too was in a sense not that kind of person. Would that make them similar people?

But, Fenshen muttered, “I want to play go,” in his arms.

Even though he was thinking he wanted to play shogi.



The unfortunate thing was probably what came after.

The uncle he was close with lost his standing. He was a clumsy person as usual.
Father spoke ill of him as a disgrace.

Although it wasn't as far as he was harmed by his family, he who was influenced by his

uncle seemed to be displeasing, and so he was ordered to campaign and told to not come back for a while.

It was fine to ignore it, but it'll probably become a problem in the distant future.

His father, the military officer, was his parent and at the same also his boss.

After he returned in around half a year, he had great difficulty sending a letter to the brothel.

It was after the time the redeeming talk was broken off, when he received the letter. He made nothing of it, thinking it was still fine.

He didn't think that it would take three years when he returned.



When he returned home, there was a mountain of letters left carelessly in his dusty room.

The tied up branch was completely withered, letting him feel the passing years.

He looked towards one of the letters on the pile, it had marks of being opened for some reason. The standard letter he was used to seeing was there. However, on the corner of that letter, there was some dark red stain on it.

He glanced at the half-opened pouch that was close by. There were dark red stains on it too.

Upon opening it, wrapped in dirty paper were two things – twigs or clay or something, he had no idea. One was very small, when he picked it up it felt like he was going to crush it.

When he identified that there was something attached to the end of the small twig, he finally realised what it was.

He had ten of those on his hands. He was too slow to realise.

Pinky promise. He heard that curse was popular.

He rewrapped the two small twigs, put it in the pouch and put it away in his breast

pocket. Then he was flying towards the prostitution quarter on a fast horse.

At the brothel of his close friend, evidently more run-down than before, there were just people that he could only see as go stones. That woman who was like rose balsam wasn't there. He understood the person who was hitting him with the broom was the madam from her voice.

Fenshen was dead.

Being abandoned by two large patrons, with her reputation fallen, her credence dropped to the ground, the prostitute had no other path left than to take in guests like a streetwalker.

It was something you would get if you think a little. But for him, who only had go and shogi in his mind, it wasn't an answer he could reach.

He could only just grovel on the ground. Even if he wailed without care of people's eyes, time does not return.

For just about everything, the short-sighted him was to blame.



Clutching his still throbbing head, Rakan got up from the bed.

A simple room he recognised, he was in the military nap room that he occasionally used when he was skipping out.

Since his daughter was guzzling it down, he didn't think the alcohol was *that* strong. Rakan didn't know what type of alcohol it was. His throat burned with just a gulp of it.

There was a pitcher of water close by. He filled up a bowl and drank. An acrid bitterness spread in his mouth, and he ended up vomiting. It was probably hangover medicine, but he sensed spite in the way it was done.

There was a paulownia box by the pitcher.

It was something he sent with a letter as a spoil from a prank along time ago. He didn't know it can be preserved in this form even when it's withered.

He recalled the daughter who was like wood-sorrel, like catfeet.

After that, he knocked on the doors of the *Rokushoukan* many times, and every time he was chastised by the madam.

There is no baby, hurry up and leave. He would be hit by a broom. A truly terrifying old lady.

When he sat down languidly, bleeding from his temples, there was a child picking something next to him.

The grass that grew on the side of the building had yellow flowers. It was something he remembered.

When he asked the child what she was doing, she answered that she was doing medicine.

He should be seeing a face that was like a go stone, but for some reason, he saw a child with an unsociable face.

The child, grasping the grass with both hands, ran off. The place she ran to, there was an old man with a staggering gait. He would normally see that face as a go stone, but he was a shogi piece. Moreover, it wasn't a pawn or a knight. It was a big piece, a promoted rook.

He realised who opened the dirty pouch, the letter that had been opened once.

Ruomen was there, his uncle who was long lost after being banished from the inner palace.

He called the child who tagged behind him like a little chick, who was holding on the catfeet, "Maomao".

Rakan took out the dirty pouch from his breast pocket. It was greatly worn out from being carried around constantly with him.

There should be two small twigs like things wrapped in paper inside it.

Maomao's playing hand was awkward. The reason could be that she wasn't familiar with shogi, but the other thing he understood was on her left hand.

When he looked at the nails that was painted red, only the pinky was crooked.

There's no point regretting.
There's nothing he could do about it.

Nevertheless, he wanted to be close.

He was done with a life where he was only surrounded by go stones and shogi pieces.

For that, he mustered his strength. Snatched the family headship from his father, drove out his half-brother and won over his nephew as his adopted son.

He negotiated with the madam many times. He finished paying for the reparations twice-fold in ten years.

He told the *kamuro* who are now called the Three Princesses and his uncle to respect Maomao's will.

Unfortunately, Rakan, who didn't excel in reading people's feelings, continued to act in ways that completely backfired on him.

Rakan returned the pouch to his breast pocket.

Let's give up this time. This time.

With his sticky nature, there's no way he's going to give up.

Also, more than anything, he couldn't stand the man who was standing next to his daughter.

Wasn't he too close? During the match, he touched his daughter's shoulders three times. It was a good feeling when he got brushed off each time though.

Well then, what shall he do for revenge?

Rakan thought as he took the pitcher and drank up the acrid medicine.
Although, no matter how disgusting, it was no mistaking this was his daughter's handiwork.

Cleaning the bugs off the flower, let think of just that for now.

T/N: Fenshen is the Chinese reading for rose balsam btw

CHAPTER 18

PAPA

(I'm so tired.)

It really is tiring to play with an unfamiliar opponent, Maomao reasserted.

She was in the middle of staggering back after sending that dead-drunk fox-eyed man to the nap room.

Since Jinshi and Gaoshun had other engagements, they had arranged a different official to accompany her along the way. He was the official who went with her during the recent *namasu* incident.

It seems his name is Basen. After meeting him several times, she finally remembered.

Though this official was unsociable, he did his job reliably, so it was comforting. If her companion didn't want to speak, Maomao had no need to force conversations with him.

We really don't get along. I really can't acknowledge him at all, Maomao thought.

Maomao thought after meeting that man again.

Even if she didn't bear anything like malice towards him as well.

As she staggered on, Maomao bore witness to a gorgeous group. In the middle of the group where court ladies were hoisting up a large parasol, dressed in a beautiful outfit, was Consort Rouran.

“...”

She heard someone click their tongue next to her. Basen was watching that group with narrowed eyes. For some reason, he looked displeased.

She looked to see what was up. There was a plump official who was standing over there. He was flanked by two men who seemed to be adjutants and followed by several people at the back. Amidst that group, there was a face she somewhat recognised.

(Is that?)

There were two imperial court ladies among them. One of them was part of the group that had called out to Maomao last time. It was the tall court lady who didn't interfere, standing at the back.

Maomao's gaze rested on her for a moment, but it shouldn't be something for her to particularly worry about. It wasn't strange for court ladies in the imperial court to belong to some faction.

When Rouran saw the plump man, she held a fan over her lips and started to speak to him familiarly.

Even though there were maids around them, she wondered if it was fine for them to talk so familiarly but,

"Damn black-bellied father and daughter."

Having heard that sinister mutter, *I see now*, Maomao got it. *Is that Rouran's father who pressured the inner palace?*

According to rumours, she heard that, as the senior statesman from the time of the previous emperor, he was a pain in the neck for the current emperor who ruled by merit.

Even so, Maomao looked at Basen.

While it was true that they were in a place where only Maomao who could hear him. *Stop badmouthing the high official*, she thought. Hypothetically, if someone heard it, they wouldn't help thinking that those words were inconceivable while conversing with Maomao.

(He's still inexperienced huh.)

Maomao thought when she looked at the young man who seemed to be around the same age as her.

(At any rate.)

He really looks a bit like someone, she thought.



It was decided that she went to Jinshi's building, not returning to the inner palace tonight.

"I was so sure you hated him."

Jinshi who returned before her was waiting.

"About who?"

Maoamo was slurping on some porridge that Suiren prepared. It was bad manners to talk while eating, but recovering the nutrients she lost at the Crystal Palace took precedence. Seeing Maomao who lost weight during the brief period she didn't see her, Suiren kept cooking more food than just porridge.

Here as well, just like the Jade Palace, maids were not limited to the jobs they do.

Jinshi, while crossing his arms, opened his mouth nervously.

"Ra...."

"Please don't mention him!!"

So you really do hate him, Jinshi looked sullen.

Resentment and hate look similar but it's quite different, Maomao thought.

"I don't resent him. I am here thanks to him knocking her up successfully."

"Knock..."

Can't you say it differently? Jinshi looked at her in shock.

(Even if you put it that way.)

It's true so there's no helping it.

"I don't know what you're imagining, but prostitutes don't fall pregnant without their

consent.”

All prostitutes continuously drink contraceptives or abortion drugs. Even if they conceive, there are various ways to abort in the early stages.

This means that she had intended to give birth.

“Rather, wouldn’t it be more that she had planned for it?”

Women can predict the times they can easily conceive to a certain extent if they read their menstrual cycles.

As for prostitutes, they can change the visits to a convenient date through letters.

“With the tactician?”

Jinshi said while holding on a dim sum that Sui ren brought to him.

“Women are sly beings.”

And so, when her aim went off the mark, she lost control of herself.

Not sparing herself to the extent of even hurting herself, and not just that—.

The dream she saw a couple of days ago.

That really happened.

Not satisfied with just her own, she included the baby’s pinky and sent the letter.

No one talked about the prostitute who gave birth to Maomao to her at the brothel. She understood that the madam had forbidden them to talk about it.

But it leaked because she was slightly curious from the atmosphere around that matter.

That the reason the *Rokushoukan* went bankrupt was due to Maomao.

That the weirdo who loved go and shogi was the father.

“Jinshi-sama, did that man talk to you in places aside from your office?”

Jinshi tilted his head.

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think so.”

Jinshi said that whenever they passed each other in the hallways, he was only acknowledged with a simple nod. That the only time he was spoken to persistently was when he was sitting in his office.

“There are occasionally people who can’t recognise people’s faces. That man is like that.”

Maomao spoke of what she heard from her dad. Maomao was honestly half-doubting about whether that kind of thing does exist, but if that man was that, she felt she could understand.

“He can’t recognise it?”

“Yes. Somehow. Because of that, he seems to recognise people from parts aside from their faces.”

Dad had said it with a sad expression. That he is also a pitiful guy.

Even so, though dad thought in his way, he didn’t stop the madam from hitting and chasing that guy away with the broom.

“For some reason, it looks like he can properly recognise my foster-father and me. So that seems to be the reason he is that oddly attached to us.”

One day, a strange man who appeared out of nowhere suddenly tried to take her away. The madam appearing, hitting him with a broom, and seeing his appearance that was now covered in blood, had inspired fear in a child’s mind.

If someone with a bloody face extended a quivering hand at you while smiling grossly, anyone would be scared.

He appeared many times after that, doing unexpected things, leaving covered in blood. Because of that, her personality gradually became one who wasn’t surprised by most things.

He insisted that he was her father, but to Maomao, her father was Dad, not that weirdo. If you considered his role, he was just a sperm donor.

He will try to be her father; brush aside Ruomen, who was her dad.
That was impossible. That was one thing she won't ever give up.

The woman who gave birth to Maomao and troubled everyone in the brothel was dead.
It had nothing to do with Maomao.

It wasn't just that man's responsibility.

Above all, she didn't have memories of the dead woman herself. Even if she did, those weren't memories of a mother at all. They were memories of a terrifying witch.

She may hate him, but she didn't resent him.

Those were the feelings that Maomao had towards Rakan.

Even if he was someone she didn't like, she didn't harbour the feeling called hate. Given that, more or less, she became disposed to interact with him in a way that went too far though.

Maomao lifted her left hand, and looked at the tip of her pinky.

"Jinshi-sama, did you know?"

"Know what?"

"Even if you cut off the tip of your finger, you can grow it back. If it's just the tip."

"..., Is that something you say while eating?"

Unusually, Jinshi looked at her with narrowed eyes. The usual positions had reversed.

"Well then, one more thing."

"What?"

"If that monocle said to you, 'Call me Papa', how would you feel?"

Jinshi froze for a moment; his entire face was unusually displeased. "Oh my," Suiren, seeing that, slapped her hand over her mouth.

"I'll want to crush his glasses."

“Thought so.”

Jinshi, looking like he understood what Maomao was trying to say, muttered, *Fathers must have it hard.*

Gaoshun who was waiting next to him was wafting sorrow for some reason.
Is something wrong?

“What’s the matter?”

When Maomao asked, Gaoshun looked up to the ceiling.

“No, please think that there are no fathers in the world who would be hated by the ones they love.”

He said seriously.

(Oh dear.)

For now, Maomao, spoon in her mouth, decided to polish off the remaining porridge.

CHAPTER 19

A CERTAIN MILITARY OFFICER'S QUESTION

With an unmotivated face, Rihaku was gazing down at the flickering lanterns from the top of the castle. Party at noon, party also at night – the main party was the night one.

“Whoa, that looks fun hey.”

His subordinate who was sitting next to him remarked.

Though he was still a kid who had only attained manhood, despite being a trainee, him passing the exam as it is to become a military officer was a testament to his skill.

He is worth poking fun, I mean, training, among those who entered this year, Rihaku thought.

Rihaku was staying in the castle tonight. Military officers make sure that there are a fixed number of them inside the castle. It wasn't really required of him now to go out of his way to keep watch outside with his promotion, but since desk jobs aren't his style, he is thus watching over the newcomer.

The official party was held from morning to afternoon, but you could say that people were waiting for the real fun at night afterwards.

Of course, the ones doing that were the merry-loving high officials. The high officials live in the high-class residential area in the north of the capital. Several among those were large, but the lights could be clearly seen from the top of the castle walls, looking like they were having fun without regarding for the price of oil.

“No way that's fun.”

Not really, though Rihaku had accompanied his boss to several parties too. The fun part was just for a portion of those officials who could get festive with the wine. For the underlings, that was a place where they had to worry about the high officials.

Even so, what's preferable to Rihaku was based on the company. No, it's because of the company that was probably why he didn't enjoy it.

Rihaku was called to the party of the chief retainer of the military, who was called Rakan, yet an eccentric and famous man. If you get called to that man's house – to

speaking about what goes on there – you’re going to a talent show¹.

Thanks to that, Rihaku, whose beard was thin, had to put on woman’s clothes, and dance with his face painted with white paint and red rouge. His body was perfectly built at the time so it must be surely weird.

However, it was also the truth that he is in his current position because of that. Rihaku’s father was a district official, equivalent to being a military officer in the royal capital with no backing. While his boss whose ability was clearly lower than him became a superior officer from just his pedigree, as soon as that Rakan saw that man at the banquet, he carefully picked up a brush and advised him to become a civil officer.

Though thinking *What is this suddenly*, the superior officer really left the military the next day. Because it was said that that man has now promoted as a civil officer, he thought it was even more *What?*

Afterwards, Rihaku taking up the superior officer’s position was also from the recommendation of the man called Rakan.

Not knowing what the person himself is thinking, on top of that annoying character, he only had an eye for people – that left behind this result.

In Rakan’s case, if he was like that in other banquets, it would no doubt be a meeting of racoons that are hiding its craftiness.*

Though the burning smell was a bother, where could the source of the fire be?²

That saying, Rihaku folded his finger while leaning against the wall.

“First was the small fire at the warehouse.”

Maomao had called it an accident, but Rihaku was strangely apprehensive. He was still holding onto the ivory pipe that he kept in custody for Maomao from that time.

It was Rihaku’s secret that he still has a small bald spot due to the burn from that time. *I’ll absolutely let Pairin stroke it next time I go to the Rokushoukan*, he made an incomprehensible vow.

“Next were the guys I came across at the bar.”

What could they be doing, those people?

In the end, he passed the day without knowing anything.

Rihaku has been stuck always with not being about to recall the people he encountered that time.

And one more thing.

“The attempted poisoning of the official huh.”

At first it was handled as a mere food poisoning case, but it became a trivial commotion. It was a high official with a connection with the military; Rihaku was also acquainted with him.

That official’s younger brother was thrown into prison a few days ago. It was unfortunate that the perpetrator was a relative.

Perhaps the treatment of the poisoning was too late, in the end, though he kept his life, he became a cripple. It was said that he couldn’t handle his work like he used to.

At the same time, the official who did the same job, while pulling out his hair saying, “What should I do”, remembered that he denounced his subordinate. It seemed to be quite an important matter.

The high official’s younger brother blurted out something strange huh, Rihaku thought. Set-up or what, it could be anyone in prison who could claim innocence. And as the prison was in the basement of the military, even Rihaku had come across the criminal many times.

It’s few if you say it’s few. It’s a lot if you say it’s a lot.

It was something Rihaku was interested in recently.

Rihaku bragged that his intuition was quite good, and was confident that it will be helpful after this.

That’s why he didn’t have to overthink and remembered this on a whim.

Thus, he thought there’s nothing he could do no matter what he considered.

Rihaku cracked his neck, yawning. When he did so, he noticed he is going to end up falling asleep.

“Well, I’m heading back.”

“Ehh, you’re going back already? Stay a little longer hey.”

“As if anyone would think staying with a rascal is fun.”

After saying just that, he was going to go downstairs and head to the nap room.

As he did so.

There was someone running noisily on the stone-paved hallway.

While saying “Come quickly” in a panicked voice, a man clad in white official robes was leading. That was probably the medical officer.

“What’s up?”

Rihaku asked while running alongside the men.

For a moment, the man looked extremely annoyed, but when he checked the jade and the colour of the tassel on the jade pendant hanging from Rihaku’s waist, he whispered to him.

“Th-the criminal. He collapsed while frothing at the mouth.”

After saying that, he forcibly tugged the medical officer who looked like he was going to collapse, and continued to descend the stairs down to the basement.

Rihaku stopped in his tracks and scratched the back of his head in disbelief.

“Frothing at the mouth huh.”

He could only think it was suspicious no matter how he thought about it.

-
1. Think Japanese game shows.
 2. Another interpretation: who/what was the source of the suspicion.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION 2

- Ah Duo (阿多)

Thirty-five years. The emperor's consort from the time he was the crown prince, his milk-sibling. A beauty who looks good in male clothes.

Currently stepped down from the seat of the Four Consorts, and is now residing in the imperial villa. The former Pure Consort.

- Joga (女華)

One of the Three Princesses of the Rokushoukan. Maomao's older sister counterpart.

- Meimei (梅梅)

One of the Three Princesses of the Rokushoukan. Maomao's older sister counterpart.

- Suiren (水蓮)

Jinshi's former wet nurse. A middle-aged court lady.

- Consort Rouran (樓蘭妃)

Eighteen years old, the Pure Consort after Ah Duo.

Her father is the Prime Minister, a person well-regarded since the era of the previous emperor.

Her clothing tastes are diverse. Looks like a different person every time you meet her.

- Shishou (子昌)

The Prime Minister. Rouran's father.

A plump and cunning man.

- Basen (馬閃)

Gaoshun's youngest child. Diligent in his job and unsociable.

- Rakan (羅漢)

Tactician. Maomao's father. Forties.

A fox-eyed weirdo who wears a monocle. Can't drink.

In exchange for being unable to distinguish between other people's faces, he has the insight to ascertain their role/purpose.

- Fenshen (鳳仙)

Prostitute. Maomao's mother. Deceased.



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